NSRF
National School Reform Faculty
Harmony Education Center

Connections
November 2015

If you're reading on an electronic device, watch for icons O M C *and blue type indicating hotlinks to more content or email addresses.*

In memorium of all lives lost in times of war and terror, currently and in the past.

Building more and better bridges between 'us' and 'them'

The central challenge for modern, diversifying societies is to create a new, broader sense of 'we.' — *Robert Putnam*

We human beings naturally divide ourselves into endless categories: in every interaction we identify (often by assuming) race, gender, culture, character, status, ethnicity, etc. When we see another human being, we classify them, and then, based on how we classify them, we decide how to treat them.

Often referred to as "othering," this activity of our minds is automatic, involuntary, and mostly outside of our conscious awareness. It might be an efficient and effective way to navigate the world. However, we all know well its dangers—nothing in this reactive process guarantees that we are correct when we put people into certain categories.

Whenever we see people that look differently than we do, speak with an accent different than our own, or express ideas that we're not used to, our perception that they are "not-us" ("them" or "other") is instantaneous.

More insidiously, we define "our-

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selves" as "good" people (however we might define "good"). Human beings also have a tendency to believe that "we" are moral and that "they" (anyone that doesn't share our beliefs, appearance, etc.) are immoral or "bad." Therefore, anyone who seems "good" is a potential member of "us." We can accept strangers and different ways of acting, thinking and being as long as "we" believe them also to be morally sound. Many feelings about "us" and "them" are about our sense of right and wrong.

We tend to group people together when they:

• Share visible similarities (for example, share a similar color of skin or are all wearing the same uniforms)

• Are physically near one another (people grouped around a tour guide)

• Share a common event (people running in a marathon)

• Are in sync with one another (a marching band)

• Resist outsiders/enforce barriers (a country club)

• Share information efficiently (law enforcement professionals)

Having a strong "us/them" dynamic in the workplace creates a profound lack of trust, which can create:

• Conflict

• Stress

• Loss of productivity

• Increased sick days

• Employee turnover

It is important to note that putting people in groups is not all bad. Labeling human groupings gives us a guide to how we should behave appropriately when in that group. (For example, you would act very differently when attending a country club party with your grandmother than you would sitting with a group of your friends at a beach cookout after a long afternoon of surfing.)

Feeling a sense of "us" is vital, not just to our mental health, but our physical health as well. When we get that "we" feeling, our heart rates are lower, our stress hormones are reduced, we sleep better and think more clearly.

Conversely, feeling like we have been "othered," that we are not in the group with power or "belonging-ness," does the opposite. (In a worst case scenario, imagine a child so traumatized by being bullied and ostracized at school that they attempt suicide.) A sense of belonging to a larger group is vital to our health and wellbeing.

It has been known in the education world for some time that collaboration with our colleagues is one effective way to develop and hone best practices in teaching (hence the proliferation of PLCs, professional learning communities, in schools across the U.S.).

Perhaps, what we are unconsciously trying to accomplish here is to create small groups of "us"— groups whose members share a high level of trust so that we can take the risks required to improve our work.

Healthy Critical Friends Group® (CFG®) communities are intentionally created to give their members that "we" feeling. I believe this is one of the reasons why we at NSRF hear people say so often that our training is one of the best professional development opportunities they have ever had. Part of this praise is explained as learning our widely useful protocols, but a big part lies in the satisfaction that comes from belonging to a group sharing a profound love of students and education, andd a commitment to improving our practice.

Knowing the importance of this powerful sense of belonging, we purposely scaffold the activities and protocols at the beginning of our five-day training to create strong bonds between participants. (This is the "friend" part of "Critical Friends Group" work.) And, because people who are suffering from "themness" can be cured by feeling part of "us," we know — and our trainees experience — that instituting CFG communities can go a long way to improve the culture of a school.

That being said, how can we create a feeling of "we" not just within our CFG groups, but thoughout the whole school? The first step is to acknowledge that relationships within the school need improving, and that different factions within the school are working at cross purposes, rather than together. Some typical "us/them" school groups are:

• Faculty who have worked at the school for many years vs. new hires

• Tradition lovers vs. those who want to try new ways of doing things

• Elementary teachers vs. secondary teachers

• Faculty who teach "traditional" academic classes vs. faculty who teach the arts

• Administrators vs. teachers

• Teachers vs. parents

• And, in more unhealthy school cultures, we know that people are consciously grouped into "us" and "them" based on gender, race, culture, etc.

So, back to the question: How do we unite all groups so that we feel we belong to all one glorious "we"? The second step is to be committed to put in the time and energy it takes to do so.

Schools can foster the "we" feeling by:

1. **Setting Social Norms**— At the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF), we call these "Agreements" because we expect everyone who has to follow them to have a say in their creation. This can be done in a school where the faculty, the administration, other school staff and the students set these norms, sign off on them and hold each other accountable to follow them. These social norms need to be visibly posted, well-known and often referred to by all parties. Also, the consequences for breaking a norm need to be well-known, and administrated consistently and fairly.

2. **Losing the Jargon**—Anytime you have one group of people who understand the meaning of a specific acronym, initiative, concept, idea, etc., and one group that doesn't, you have created "us" (the people who know) and "them" (the people who don't). Remember, the sense of "us/them" is tied up with "good/bad" and "right/wrong" in our minds. So, knowing these definitions (or not knowing them) becomes good and right or bad and wrong, depending on which group you are in. When you are speaking to any group, to help everyone avoid the tendency to feel "otherness" when new ideas and concepts are introduced, take care to define and describe them in terms that everyone can understand rather than naming them with cryptic labels. Share information transparently. Always assume that there is someone in the group who doesn't know what you are talking about. Freely sharing information without asking them to (possibly embarrass themselves) by asking allows the not-knowers to enter the "we" group of people who understand.

3. **Developing a "Try it and See" Attitude When Introducing Something New**—When people get too excited or too angry about new ideas, initiatives, processes, etc., others may be automatically turned off. If you want previously "othered" individuals to become a part of your "we" (instituting an initiative you that you think will be good for the school, let's say) then offer a information about the initiative calmly with accompanying reasons about why you support the idea. Offer to let people research it on their own, or try it out for themselves and then follow up with them later about their reactions. Coming on too strong might feel as if you are trying to force your opinion on them, and no one wants to be forced into doing anything—even something you think would be good for the school and that they would love (such as institute CFG work!).

4. **Sharing Common Experiences**—Not just any experiences, but activities and structures that are designed to create a strong feeling of "we." These kinds of activities and protocols are featured on the first few days of NSRF's New CFG

Coaches' Training. (Good thing I already told you what these acronyms and terms mean, right?) Examples are:

- **Activities where people can share personal information around a topic of interest to all participants.** For example, the Quotes Introduction Activity M is one where participants share a quote around education that deeply resonates with them. (Also, see Compass Points Activity. O M)

- **Setting Agreements** (See #1) C

- **Hopes and Fears Activity** M —This activity surfaces people's hopes and fears (or concerns) about any event, topic, or initiative. Talking openly about goals or positives that can be achieved while candidly addressing concerns pull people together as a group. There's nothing like realizing that others have the same hopes and fears you do to make them feel like "We're all in it together." This process creates even more bonding when the group actively works to do something about their fears and obstacles—what kind of supports are needed so We can all get through this in the best possible way? (See also Zones of Comfort, Risk and Danger O M)

- **Make sure all voices are heard**—Whatever you do, provide platforms that require full participation by all participants. For groups to function well, all voices need to be heard, all talents utilized, and all successes celebrated. If you have a voice in "our" group, you automatically become one of "us." Some protocols that support equitable participation are the Microlabs O C , Success Analysis Protocol O C , and Chalk Talk Protocol O M .

- **Debrief, reflect and follow through**—Always have participants reflect on their shared experiences and debrief the experience together. What did we think of this experience as a group? What did we learn? What could have made this a better experience for us? What might we do next? Then, follow through by visiting the group's progress. Materials such as the Agreements and the Hopes and Fears chart are "living" documents. They are meant to change as the group or the group's circumstances change. If these documents are created and never reviewed, the resulting bonding will fall apart, allowing people to drift back into their old familiar "us/them" groups.

Remember, we can influence and change how we perceive other groups of humans. Our categories for people are always in flux, depending on ever-changing circumstance, context, experience, and knowledge. As a result, it might be more accurate to think of groups as processes, not stagnant things. Although we have all been born with brains "hard-wired" to automatically groups others into a myriad of categories, we are not obligated to adhere to those categories. Our history has proven that human beings can imagine great, powerful and positive groups of "us." None of us can (or should) stop this automatic activity of our brains, but we can choose to take time to be aware of what's happening and make decisions accordingly about our actions.