The Stanford Approach to Leadership Development:

Experiential Learning through T-Groups and Other Methodologies

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NEW SKILLS REQUIRED OF LEADERS

Whether we consider the world “flat” (Freedman, 2004), “spiky” (Florida, 2005) or “regional” (Ghemawat, 2007) there is no doubt that the global business environment has changed dramatically in recent decades. The fall of the Iron Curtain, the entry of “BRICs” (O’Neill, 2001), “Next Eleven” (O’Neill, 2005) and other countries into world-trade, the rise of the Internet and mobile communication are all factors that have lowered transaction costs, enabled collaboration across boundaries, spurred transformations in organizational culture and in general increased the complexity in the world.

At a more personal level, these and other changes in the modern business framework are redefining the skills that leaders and managers must possess to be effective, and in turn this shift is having a profound effect on the nature of business education. One of the strongest currents is a greater emphasis on the interpersonal aspects of leadership, and a new understanding of management as an activity that occurs in a social context. The Stanford Graduate School of Business (GSB) consistently ranks among the best business schools in the world (Financial Times 2010). In part the school’s reputation rests on its commitment to leadership development and its innovative approach in this field, and a closer look at the
The Soft Side of Business

In the late 1970s a group of McKinsey & Co-Consultants developed a framework for analyzing organizations that became known as the “7s Model,” a reference to the seven components of the framework: Strategy, Structure, Systems, Skills, Staff, Style and Shared Values (Peters, et al, 1982). Historically the 7s Model has been interpreted as dividing organizations into “hard” and “soft” elements, and an organization’s strategy, structure and systems came to be seen as “hard” not only because they are more easily reduced to tangible artefacts but also because of a bias in business culture that viewed these elements as more complex, serious and important. The “soft” elements—skills, staff, style and shared values—were typically viewed as relatively less important and easier to manage.

But the changes noted above have led to a shift in this emphasis and a recognition that the “soft” elements in the model—i.e. those that focus on people and interpersonal dynamics—are often more important than the “hard” elements and much more difficult to manage effectively. This shift is reflected vividly in a November 2007 blog post by Tom Peters himself (which he originally wrote in all capitals to convey his passion on the subject):

“HARD IS SOFT.”
SOFT IS HARD.

THE READILY-MANIPULABLE NUMBERS ARE THE TRUE "SOFT STUFF."

THE RELATIONSHIPS-LEADERSHIP-"CULTURE"-"ACTION BIAS" [OR NOT]
ARE THE TRUE "HARD STUFF."” (Peters 2007)

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AT

STANFORD

In February 2010, Stanford GSB Dean Garth Saloner was interviewed by McKinsey & Co. on “Building the Next-Generation Business Leader,” and his response to the interview’s first question--Has the economic crisis changed what employers are looking for in MBA graduates?--provides an important perspective on the school’s evolving approach to leadership development and its increased emphasis on “soft” skills:

“What [employers] really tell us they need are leadership skills. It’s what you might think of as the softer skills, or the people skills. Those are the things that are in short supply in managers who they want to rise to the most important and significant ranks in their companies. The harder skills of finance and supply chain management and accounting and so on, I think those have become more standardized in management education, have become kind of what you think of as a hygiene factor: everybody ought to know this. That skill set is pretty widely available. To be perfectly honest, there’s not a ton of differentiation in those [skills] across a number of providers. But the softer skill sets, the real leadership, the ability to work with others and through others, to execute, that is still in very scarce supply.” (Saloner, 2010)
In the same interview with McKinsey & Co., Saloner goes on to note that the school’s emphasis on interpersonal skills and critical thinking in the context of leadership development requires a corresponding emphasis on experiential learning:

“There is a set of leadership skills that cannot be taught or lectured about but that can be learned only experientially. You have to put people in an experiential setting, in small groups and have them work through leadership tasks. It’s ideal if there is actual leading involved. I think that has not been lost, in the aggregate, on firms who are hiring this kind of talent. And the implication is that they’re looking for judgment, and they’re looking for the ability to really do critical thinking, which is one of the reasons we have emphasized critical analytical thinking in our own curriculum... There are a set of leadership skills that can be taught. They have to be taught experientially. This is not something you can lecture about. You have to put people in small groups, give them leadership tasks, and have them work them through. So what we’ll do is we’ll put them in a group, we’ll give them a difficult assignment--maybe it's a difficult conversation, maybe it's feedback, maybe it's execution--and we will videotape what they're doing in these sessions. And these small teams will have coaches, leadership coaches. So this is very different from the way management education looked 15 or 20 years ago.” (Saloner, 2010a)

Stanford is not alone among leading institutions that are putting an increased emphasis on leadership development and experiential learning. Prof. Bill George, the former CEO and Chairman of Medtronic and since 2004 a professor of management practice at Harvard
Business School discussed these topics in a 2007 interview with prominent U.S. journalist Charlie Rose:

“[Leadership can be] learned. I teach now, and I don’t think you can teach leadership, I think you can learn about it. I think you can learn about yourself. It comes from within, from who are you inside and what makes you tick, and what are those tapes playing in your head about what you want to be and what your limitations are... What we can do [in leadership development classes] is cause people to come together and learn about themselves through dialogue... You learn about who you are, and if you go inside yourself, you find out, "What are my passions?"... The hardest thing we have to do is see ourselves as others see us. And do you gain that self-awareness? Some people think they have it, but they've never really tested themselves, and that is crucial. “ (George, 2007)

Prof. George’s emphasis in his work at Harvard on experiential learning through dialogue and on heightened self-awareness through feedback is consistent with Stanford’s approach to leadership development. The continued popularity of Prof. George’s courses on leadership at Harvard and the extension of his curriculum and teaching methods into executive education programs at HBS (George 2010) suggest that Stanford’s emphasis on leadership development through experiential learning is taking place in the context of a larger shift in business education.

*The New Curriculum*

Dean Saloner’s comments above on leadership development and experiential learning can be seen as an outgrowth of the school’s new curriculum, which was adopted in June 2006 and
initially implemented in 2007. (As a GSB faculty member before becoming Dean, Saloner led the task force that recommended the changes to the curriculum.) This new curriculum has four primary pillars (see also Stanford GSB News, 2005):

- A customized program that provides students with greater freedom to tailor their academic experience to better meet their personal needs and career interests.
- A greater emphasis on critical analytical thinking, primarily via small-group seminars that address issues which cut across traditional business disciplines.
- Expansion of the school’s global management program, including a requirement that each student participate in a substantial international experience prior to graduation.
- And a specific focus on leadership development and communication skills, not only through the creation of new classes and programs such as the Leadership Labs and the Mastery in Communication initiative, but also through the expansion of existing classes such as Interpersonal Dynamics.

Today the GSB emphasizes what it calls “personal leadership” in its description of the school’s curriculum (About the GSB, 2010):

*We work to help students develop capabilities necessary to lead, to achieve, and to change the world--to help them reach heights they may not have imagined when they arrived. We do this in three areas:*

- *Critical Analytical Thinking--the ability to construct and recognize solid logical arguments, their underlying assumptions, and their limitations.*
- Personal Leadership--a deep self-awareness of their own strengths, weaknesses, and even identity, coupled with an understanding of myriad influence styles and how best to use them.
- Innovative Thinking--the ability to think creatively and to develop new solutions to old problems.

Implementation and Institutional Support

What does this emphasis on leadership development and experiential learning look like in practice at the Stanford GSB? How has the school implemented these concepts? Many of the leadership development efforts at the GSB involve students learning experientially and working together in small groups. They tackle difficult interpersonal issues, ranging from understanding how to communicate with each other more effectively and how to exert influence in an acceptable and sustainable way to solving business scenario "cases" in role plays in a series of “Leadership Labs,” which culminate in an all-day competition known as the “Executive Challenge.”

All of these courses provide students with extensive support in the experiential learning process in the form of specially trained second-year students or professional executive coaches and group facilitators. These second-year students are enrolled in upper level elective courses in which they participate in experiential learning activities to further develop their own leadership and interpersonal skills. The second-year students then have opportunities to employ their enhanced skills in their work with first-year students, and Stanford makes use of this “train-the-trainer” model in several courses, two of which are described in greater detail below.
Stanford also has a group of “Leadership Coaches,” a team of professional executive coaches who work primarily with second-year students in the upper level electives noted above. The Leadership Coaches are housed within the GSB’s Center for Leadership Development and Research, a program that provides administrative and managerial support to all of the courses described in this paper in addition to a number of other classes and activities at the school. *(One of the co-authors of this paper has been a Leadership Coach at the GSB since 2007.)*

In addition, for the past several decades GSB faculty and staff have conducted a Group Facilitation Training Program, which prepares external professionals to facilitate groups in the school’s *Interpersonal Dynamics* course, which is also discussed below. Several hundred people have graduated from this program over the years, and nearly 200 are members of an email list maintained by the school.

While a comprehensive review of the school’s offerings in these areas is beyond the scope of this paper, we can provide an overview of several key programs and classes to illustrate the school’s approach. We will describe in greater detail Leadership Coaching and Mentoring and the Leadership Labs, and we will conclude by paying special attention to *Interpersonal Dynamics*, a class that makes extensive use of the group dynamic to support students’ efforts to enhance the interpersonal skills that are central to the evolving definition of leadership referenced in this paper. It is worth noting that *Interpersonal Dynamics* will be taken by 360 students at the GSB in the 2010-11 academic year, which is more 90% of the second-year class. *Interpersonal Dynamics* is frequently cited by GSB alumni as a life-changing experience, and Dean Saloner recently noted that “Many of those same alumni believe that it
was one of the most influential courses they took while at Stanford.” (Saloner 2010b)

**Leadership Coaching and Mentoring**

The GSB’s *Leadership Coaching and Mentoring* class launched by David Bradford prior to the initiation of the school’s new curriculum over the past five years has become an exemplar of the school’s focus on “personal leadership” under the guidance of Carole Robin.

Thirty-six second-year students are enrolled in this class, but they represent just a fraction of the students who are involved in the overall experience. An additional 108 first-year students elect to receive coaching and mentoring from the 36 second-years in the class, and three of these first-year “coachees” are assigned to each second-year coaching student. From the perspective of the first-year “coachees,” they are not enrolled in a class, but they have made a formal commitment to participate in a total of ten one-hour coaching sessions with their second-year coach over the course of 20 weeks from January through May (spanning the GSB’s Winter and Spring Quarters.)

The second-year coaching students work with Prof. Robin and a team of professional executive coaches (including one of the co-authors of this paper) to develop the interpersonal skills that will allow them to successfully coach their first-year colleagues. Issues that the “coachees” bring to their second-year coach include not only concerns about personal relationships or coping with life at the GSB, but also questions about their Summer internships and longer-term career direction. While the first-year “coachees” benefit from the guidance of a more experienced peer, the second-year coaches are developing an essential set of skills that will allow them to be better leaders and managers.
The class specifically references “mentoring” in its title in order to sanction the process of second-year students drawing directly on their own experiences in providing guidance to their first-year “coachees.” But the primary emphasis is on coaching rather than mentoring, and this requires the second-year students to focus on asking questions rather than providing answers, and on helping their “coachees” reach their own conclusions rather than offering advice. While the second-year coaches have a differentiated role by virtue of their seniority, their training, and the context of the coaching relationship, in their work with their “coachees” they learn how to lead not through directive authority but by helping subordinates decide for themselves what issues are most pressing and how best to address them.

While the curriculum for the second-year coaching students working with Prof. Robin and her coaching staff provides a thorough conceptual framework for the class, the overall experience is highly experiential. Each week the coaching students typically complete several readings and written assignments outside of class and hear a lecture in class, and have numerous opportunities to put the concepts from the readings and lectures into practice. These opportunities include not only the bi-weekly sessions with their first-year “coachees,” but also a range of coaching exercises conducted in class with their fellow students. The coaching students are also divided into six-person groups that meet bi-weekly under the guidance of a professional coach, and in these settings the students coach each other, participate in coaching-related exercises, and learn from each other’s experiences with their “coachees.”

In the 2009-10 academic year, nearly 150 first-year students applied for the 108 “coachee” slots, and more than 70 second-year students sought to be among the 36 students accepted
into the class. As a result of the course’s popularity, Prof. Robin is planning to expand the
class to 48 second-year students in the 2010-11 academic year, which would allow the school
to accommodate 144 first-year students as “coachees.”

**Leadership Labs**

An important vehicle for leadership development at the GSB has been the *Leadership Labs*,
an experiential learning program that began in pilot form as an elective class in the 2006-07
academic year and has been a mandatory core class for all incoming students since the Fall of
2007. Although the Leadership Labs are currently being redesigned, and the program will
evolve before its next iteration in the 2011-12 academic year, the model in use over the past
four years provides a number of insights into leadership development and experiential
learning at the GSB that remain relevant and is described below in detail.

From 2007 through 2010, the incoming class at the GSB was divided up into 48 “squads”
consisting of eight first-year students, and each squad was assigned a second-year student
known as a “Leadership Fellow.” The 48 Fellows had been selected the previous academic
year through a competitive process that tested their interpersonal, coaching and presentation
skills, and they then received specialized training working with Evelyn Williams and a team
of “Leadership Coaches,” a group of professional executive coaches who are permanent
members of the school’s staff and who support a range of courses at the school related to
leadership development and interpersonal skills.

In the Fall Quarter at the GSB, first-year students take many of their mandatory classes in
groups of approximately 60 students, known as "sections." Each first-year section includes
eight leadership squads, and in 2007-2010, the eight second-year Leadership Fellows
assigned to those squads were responsible for facilitating a series of Leadership Labs over the first seven weeks of the Quarter. Each lab focused on a topic related to leadership and interpersonal skills, beginning with “Awareness,” running through topics such as “Managing Conflict” and “Assertiveness,” and concluding with “Influence.”

Typically a leadership lab involved one or two second-year Fellows presenting some conceptual content related to that week’s topic to the entire first-year section, and then each first-year squad moved to a separate breakout room with their Leadership Fellow, where they would participate in several experiential learning activities. Most of these activities involved role-playing in a hypothetical business scenario that was designed to present the first-year students with challenges related to that week’s topic, such as addressing a conflict or influencing their peers. The Leadership Fellows both participated in the role-plays and then led a debrief of the experience among their squad. Most of the role-plays were video-recorded, and the files were stored in secure folders on the school’s servers so that students could review them later and assess their strengths and areas for improvement, as well as changes in their performance over the course of the labs.

In addition to these large-scale labs, each eight-student squad would meet separately with their Leadership Fellow in order to review their performance in that week’s lab, to address other topics related to their experience at the GSB, and to participate in additional group exercises. While the Leadership Fellows program provided a suggested agenda for these weekly meetings, it was up to each Leadership Fellow and their squad to determine independently how to best make use of this time. Fellows typically began the Quarter running these weekly meetings themselves, but they typically ceded management to their students within one or two weeks in order to foster a sense of ownership among the squad
and to encourage the establishment of a self-managing team. Leadership typically rotated among first-year students, providing them with an opportunity to lead their peers and to further hone their skills.

At the end of Fall Quarter, the Leadership Labs culminated in the “Executive Challenge,” an all-day competition in which students from the first-year squads interacted with Stanford GSB alumni in extensive role-plays based on contemporary business scenarios. At the beginning of the day each first-year squad was presented with four “cases,” role-play scenarios similar to those they had encountered in the previous labs but typically much longer and more complex. The squad was responsible for dividing themselves into pairs and assigning each pair to one of the four cases. At intervals throughout the day, the squad entered a GSB classroom and a given pair encountered a set of alumni who interacted with them in the role-play and who then judged the students’ performance on a set of metrics related to their effectiveness at accomplishing the objective in the scenario, establishing a clear process for doing so, and building positive interpersonal relationships. The first-year squads were accompanied by their Leadership Fellows, who provided guidance and support to their students during the day. With nearly 400 first-year students, nearly 200 alumni judges, 48 Leadership Fellows and dozens of GSB staff volunteers, over the last four years the Executive Challenge has been a remarkable event at the GSB, second in size only to the school’s annual graduation ceremony.

As noted above, the Leadership Labs are currently being redesigned, and the model described here will evolve. That said, we expect that the next iteration of the program will place an even greater emphasis on the leadership development philosophy discussed in this paper.

*Interpersonal Dynamics, aka “Touchy-Feely”*
Interpersonal Dynamics, known colloquially at the school as “Touchy-Feely,” is one of the longest-running and most important classes at the Stanford GSB. As referenced above, Garth Saloner dedicated his Dean’s Column in the Summer 2010 issue of the school’s magazine, Stanford Business, to “The ‘Touchy Feely’ Legacy.” We quote from this article at length to illustrate the central role of this course in the school’s approach to leadership development and experiential learning:

“Generations of GSB alumni have been touched by our renowned Interpersonal Dynamics elective, known to all as "Touchy-Feely," Many of those same alumni believe that it was one of the most influential courses they took while at Stanford. Decades since it was first taught at the business school, however, courses like it are hardly mainstream in management education. Yet its impact on the curriculum at the GSB has only grown through the years as what we have learned about experience-based education from teaching it has become a core capability that we are able to leverage across a variety of classes.

“Early on the course was controversial among educators at the GSB and elsewhere. After all, it doesn’t look much like a conventional class; certainly there is no final exam. And to those appraising it from afar it has the feel of something distinctly Californian. Some kind of a self-help workshop perhaps, but not a for-credit course!

“But as our graduates come to appreciate after becoming managers and leaders, the ability to work effectively with and through people is one of the most important determinants of success in any organization. Self-awareness, knowledge of the impact of one’s style on others, and skill at interpersonal interactions are at least as important a part of the leader's skill set as is training in the more traditional business disciplines.
“Today, in contrast to the one section of 12 students when Touchy-Feely began in 1966, we offer 8 sections of 36 students each, and experience-based leadership courses abound in our curriculum.” (Saloner 2010b)

Note that since the publication of Dean Saloner’s column just a few months ago, the GSB has increased the number of sections in the course from eight to ten, bringing the total number of available slots in the course to 360, or more than 90% of the second-year class at the school.

Although each of the handful of GSB-faculty members who teach Interpersonal Dynamics, either to MBA students or through the school’s executive education program does so in a personalized way and employs a curriculum with a customized set of readings and exercises, there is a common model and methodology which we describe here.

Each section of Interpersonal Dynamics includes 36 students who are divided into three 12-person “T-groups.” (The “T” stands for “training”; the history and pedagogy of T-groups and is discussed at greater length below.) Each T-group is assigned two “facilitators,” who work with that group throughout the course and who act both as differentiated authority figures within the group and as undifferentiated fellow members of the group. (All facilitators are either graduates of the school’s Group Facilitation Training Program, noted above, or are being trained by GSB faculty in the facilitation process.)

Although interpersonal Dynamics is primarily experiential in nature, it comes with an extensive conceptual component. Each week during the course the section meets in class to hear a lecture by the faculty member on a topic related to interpersonal skills or group

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1 Lara Tiedens, David Bradford, Carole Robin, Scott Bristol, Richard Francisco, Flo Holyman
processes, and these lectures are supported by related readings and written assignments.

However, the bulk of the students’ time in the course is spent outside the lecture hall in their T-groups. In a typical week, each T-group will meet for one 90-minute session during the day, and another three-hour session during the evening. On occasion the facilitators will lead the students in the group through a structured exercise designed in advance by the faculty member, but almost all time spent in T-group is entirely open and unstructured, and the topics of discussion are determined by the group’s members.

In addition to these regular weekly meetings, near the end of the Quarter the entire section spends a weekend together at a nearby conference center, where they meet in T-groups for a total of 17 hours from Friday evening through Sunday afternoon. During this weekend, each T-group is joined by a “guest trainer,” a highly experienced facilitator (a role in which one of the co-authors of this paper serves since 2009); the faculty member serves as one of the guest trainers, and the other two are drawn from among the school’s facilitator community. The weekend is typically the culminating experience in the course, and afterward the group meets for just two or three more sessions before concluding.

In this almost entirely experiential setting, students have a unique opportunity to participate in a group, to understand and assess the effect of their individual behavior on others and, in turn, the effect of others’ behavior on them. A fundamental element of this experience is “feedback,” the process of sharing one’s emotional and cognitive responses to another’s behavior. Giving and receiving feedback with their fellow group members allows students to understand how certain behaviors help them achieve certain interpersonal goals, and, alternatively, how other behaviors may prevent them from achieving those same goals. By
both participating in and observing interactions in the group environment over a number of weeks, students gain clarity on how they typically respond to others (and how others typically respond to them), and they enhance their ability to communicate at a more meaningful level and to greater effect.

Interpersonal Dynamics has served as a cornerstone of Stanford’s approach to leadership development and experiential learning. The course is a key component of the school’s heightened emphasis on the interpersonal aspect of leadership, as reflected in the new curriculum, the classes and programs discussed above, and a number of other courses beyond those described in this paper. Interpersonal Dynamics’ dramatic growth and sustained success since it was first taught at the GSB in 1966 reflects the T-group methodology’s ability to help people become more effective leaders and managers, and we now turn to an assessment of this methodology in the Stanford model.

**T-GROUPS IN THE STANFORD MODEL**

Although a complete history and description of the T-group methodology is beyond the scope of this paper, some further details will allow us to consider specific aspects of the model employed in the GSB’s Interpersonal Dynamics course. T-groups were first developed in the mid-1940s by social psychologist Kurt Lewin. After Lewin’s death in 1947, his colleagues—including Leland Bradford, father of GSB Prof. David Bradford—established the National Training Laboratories (known today as the NTL Institute) to continue their work in group dynamics, organizational development and the process of change. With ongoing support from NTL, T-groups spread as a learning methodology to a wide range of settings and
institutions around the world.

Robert Gallagher (Gallagher, 2001) an organizational development consultant based in Seattle, Washington, offers one description of T-groups:

“The T-group provides participants with an opportunity to learn about themselves, their impact on others and how to function more effectively in group and interpersonal situations. It facilitates this learning by bringing together a small group of people for the express purpose of studying their own behavior when they interact within a small group...

“The group's work is primarily process rather than content oriented. The focus tends to be on the feelings and the communication of feelings, rather than on the communication of information, opinions, or concepts. This is accomplished by focusing on the 'here and now' behavior in the group. Attention is paid to particular behaviors of participants, not on the "whole person"; feedback is non-evaluative and reports on the impact of the behavior on others...

“The training is not structured in the manner you might experience in an academic program or a meeting with an agenda or a team with a task to accomplish. The lack of structure and limited involvement of the trainers provides space for the participants to decide what they want to talk about. No one tells them what they ought to talk about. The lack of direction results in certain characteristic responses; participants are silent or aggressive or struggle to start discussions or attempt to structure the group.(}
While Gallagher’s description provides an abstract overview of a typical T-group experience, a complete understanding of the methodology is complicated by the diversity of settings in which T-groups are utilized and the purposes they serve for the participants. Some T-groups focus specifically on understanding small group dynamics, while others aim to deepen self-understanding or enhance interpersonal communication. Some T-groups occur in a private setting where the primary goal is personal growth and development, while others occur in an academic or corporate setting where the goals of the participants are integrated with the goals of the institution.

Depending on these and other factors, a given T-group’s focus may be one of the three levels that simultaneously exist in every group setting:

1. **Intrapersonal**, i.e. internal emotions and thoughts related to one’s recent and long-term personal history (“there-and-then”)

2. **Interpersonal**, i.e. emotions and thoughts related to one’s immediate interactions with other group members (“here-and-now”), with a predominant focus on specific person-to-person relationships that exist within the group.

3. **Group**, i.e. emotions and thoughts related to the ongoing interaction among the group as whole, with a predominant focus on the individual’s role relative to the group and on the collective identity of the group.

With this context in mind, we can assess T-groups as they are utilized in the GSB’s Interpersonal Dynamics course.²

² Note that while both co-authors of this article work in various roles in Interpersonal Dynamics and at the GSB, these remarks are not intended to provide a comprehensive
**Common Experience and Conceptual Framework**

Because T-groups at the GSB exist within the context of an academic course that includes a conceptual component in the form of class lectures and assigned readings, students in each group share a common experience and conceptual framework that informs their approach to the group. As noted above, each faculty member employs a personalized curriculum, so this common experience and conceptual framework is not identical for every section of the class. That said, the various curricula are sufficiently similar to allow students from different sections to have a sense of a shared experience. The result is that specific topics, such as diversity, sub-group identity and interpersonal influence--are legitimimized and sanctioned as topics for discussion. The course also prompts groups to explore specific topics through occasional exercises conducted in class and in group. However, at no time is any effort made by faculty or facilitators to impose a topic on a group or to mandate a discussion on a particular topic. This careful balance between A) providing a common experience for all students and B) allowing each T-group to decide for itself how its members want to make use of this common experience seems to be an important element in the success of Interpersonal Dynamics.

**Effective Interpersonal Behavior**

Another noteworthy dimension of T-groups in the context of Interpersonal Dynamics is a set of shared assumptions about what constitutes effective interpersonal communication and leadership behavior (above and beyond the more general expectation in T-groups that participants should report on their first-person emotional responses.) These assumptions are not spelled out in detail, nor are they rigidly enforced, but we can make some broad assessment of T-groups at Stanford, and they reflect our personal experience rather than an official institutional perspective.
generalizations about them and can describe how they manifest in GSB T-groups. They also appear to be informed by a set of interlocking cultures that converge within the course: contemporary business culture within the United States; the historical and geographic culture of California and, more specifically, the San Francisco Bay Area; the institutional culture of Stanford University; and even the micro-culture of the course itself which has developed over the past 44 years. Again, we want to note that our understanding of these shared assumptions reflects our personal experience in the course and is not an official institutional perspective. With that caveat, three shared assumptions about effective interpersonal behavior that appear to be embedded in this model are:

- The power of emotions as a means of interpersonal influence, and the importance of verbally expressing emotions when seeking to influence others.
- The utility of creating interpersonal connections through verbally expressed appreciation and other forms of positive interaction in order to create a context within which conflicts can be effectively resolved.
- The importance of respecting personal boundaries, as articulated by each individual, as a means of creating a sufficient level of safety in the group.

This is not a comprehensive list of shared assumptions, and it may not be possible to create a comprehensive list, as these dynamics are implicit and subjectively experienced aspects of the course and the intersecting cultures that have shaped it. An Interpersonal Dynamics faculty member or other group facilitators might well come up with an entirely different list. But it is our assertion that a set of shared assumptions about effective behavior, as implicit and subjective as those assumptions may be, is embedded in the course and informs the T-group methodology at the GSB. One noteworthy example of this dynamic is that it is more important for facilitators in GSB T-groups to serve as role models and to embody
effective behavior than it may be in other group settings.

**Interpersonal Focus**

Finally, as one might expect, given the name of the course, T-groups in Interpersonal Dynamics focus on the interpersonal dimension of the group experience. GSB T-groups do draw on intrapersonal revelations and disclosures, as well as on group level observations, but the primary emphasis is on one-on-one interpersonal interactions taking place in the context of the common experience and conceptual framework described above. Group participants may make extensive personal disclosures about past life events and other “there-and-then” issues, but these typically occur in service of establishing trust within the group and precede more immediate “here-and-now” focused interactions. We suspect that this dynamic stems in part from some of the group characteristics of Stanford GSB students. For example, the GSB is a transition stage between students’ family/early study/first business years and their long-term future career. Many students are also in the process of establishing their individual identities as professional adults, apart from their families, with the added challenge of being thousands of miles from home. In this context a focus on individual identity and interpersonal interaction may be more likely.

**CONCLUSION**

New leadership skills are required in the contemporary business world, and business schools are responding to this changing environment. The Stanford Graduate School of Business stands out for its strong emphasis on interpersonal skills and for its commitment to leadership development through experiential learning. This dynamic is reflected not only in existence of the courses we have described above, but also in their increasing popularity among the
school’s students. For example, the school’s Interpersonal Dynamics course is now offered to 360 students each year, which is more than 90% of the size of the typical graduating class. The GSB’s approach to leadership development provides a model that is clearly meeting the needs of both employers and of MBA students, and we encourage its further study and adoption in other institutional settings. We conclude quoting once more GSB Dean Garth Saloner (Saloner 2010b),

[A]s our graduates come to appreciate after being managers and leaders, the ability to work effectively with and through people is one of the most important determinants of success in any organization. Self-awareness, knowledge of the impact of one’s style on others, and skill at interpersonal interactions are at least as important a part of the leader’s skill set as is training in the more traditional business disciplines.

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