

Entering Groups

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I'm passionate about creating work environments that truly enable and support your success. Feel free to call or email me for a complimentary mini consultation to explore potential opportunities to increase your capacity and support the success of your agile initiative. Just tell me what you think the issue is, and we'll start from there.

Coming in loaded for bear won't help you be effective. Showing empathy for the group's journey will.

Most of the time, people integrate into groups well enough that we don't really notice how it happens. But a recent rocky experience got me noticing.

Looking back over several teams I've observed and groups I've been part of, here are three (rather spectacular) examples of a newcomer failing to integrate.

A skilled XP programmer joined a group that was adopting agile engineering practices. On his very first day as part of the team, he told his new team mates that they needed to start doing TDD, and gave them a lesson in refactoring. Over the next several weeks, he found the opportunity to coach each member on his programming skills.

He was quickly ostracized.

A newcomer to a loosely organized professional group decided to join a two-day informal retreat organized by the group. The night before the retreat started, he announced to all within earshot that the group was highly dysfunction...and he was going to "fix" the group. He started right in the next morning, issuing challenges and

confronting people. When one of the organizers offered the newcomer feedback, the newcomer shouted at him.

It was later noted that that was the most dysfunctional and unpleasant event the group had experienced in their long history.

The newcomer did not become an old hand—he was not invited back.

A new team member joined a distributed team that met face-to-face twice a year. The team arranged to hold one of their F2F meetings to coincide with the new member joining the group. The group hired a facilitator and worked with her to design an agenda that would share group history, revise working agreements to reflect the new group, and identify priorities for the year.

Without consulting anyone, the new member set up a meeting with representatives from a commercial product company. The new member announced he'd arranged a breakfast meeting prior to the main meeting to discuss the product and that five people from the product company would be present.

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The “old” members declined the breakfast meeting. The group had been wrestling with the question of product endorsements and had decided, after much heated discussion, to remain neutral. The newcomer felt the group was “resistant” to his ideas, and that set the pattern for his participation. At the end of the year, he was asked to leave the group.

In each of these instances, the new group member wanted to contribute. Why did their efforts backfire?

The new members failed to:

- *Make contact and establish relationships before offering help and ideas.*
- *Understand the group, how the group viewed issues and develop empathy for their struggles.*
- *Orient to the group’s goal, history, and context and see how their ideas could fit in.*

In contrast, when people enter groups successfully, they:

- *Get to know the other group members and become known by them.*

- *Learn something of the group’s history and context.*
- *Orient themselves to the goal, tasks, and priorities of the group.*
- *Look for ways to contribute that line up with those goals and priorities.*

People have different needs for affiliation and inclusion, which affect how they go about entering. But you can’t skip these processes, if you hope to become part of the group. *This is especially important if your views are divergent from the rest of the group.* Coming in loaded for bear won’t help you be effective. Showing empathy for the group’s journey will.

Looking back on the three examples I described above, the result isn’t surprising. However well-meaning the newcomers were, they failed to integrate into the group.

I suspect all three wanted to be helpful, and to do something meaningful for the group. I suspect they wanted to be valued by the group and were trying to prove their worth.

But without entering the group before they tried to turn it, their actions assured the opposite result.