

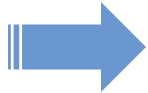


# Reversal Theory and Group Dynamics

Larry Hirschhorn – 2025

# Sections

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- 
- Purpose of this presentation
  - Reversal Theory
  - Reversal Theory and Workgroup modalities
  - The Deformations and the Basic Assumptions
  - Describe potential interventions to help groups work
  - Primitive functioning
  - Observing groups
  - Next steps

# Why a new theory

- In the Group Relations tradition, we say that a group is “working.” But how is it working? What behaviors are in place that facilitate work? What emotions fuel the work?
- “Working” is a general term. What are its different facets?
- If we understood this, we could more clearly explain **why groups go “off-task.”**
- This could increase our ability to help groups stay on task.
- Reversal theory provides us with a typology of “working.” This typology also provides a more comprehensive view of how groups go off task.

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# I was inspired by Michael Apter's body of work which he calls "Reversal Theory."

Apter describes four "meta-motivations." They are **distinctive forms of object relations** that describe four basic ways people use to **relate to one another**.

1. **Conforming ↔ Rebelling**
2. **Mastering ↔ Sympathizing**
3. **Serious (purposeful) ↔ Playful**
4. **Self-focused ↔ Other-focused**

# They are “meta” because they establish the frame of reference, the context for many other feelings and behaviors

- If I am in the “rebel-conform” frame of reference, I will experience other people and myself in an interpersonal drama centered on **authority relations and power dynamics**.
- My rebellious stance will provoke feelings centered on “grievance,” “rights,” “justice,” “privilege,” “power,” “resentment,” and “resistance.”
- My conformist stance will provoke feelings centered on belonging, “obeying”, “duty,” “love,” and “gratitude.”
- I am likely to **oscillate** between these two stances. For example, I will sometimes resent the authority person I love.

I find “meta-motivation” to be a clumsy term. Instead..

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- **I am going to call each meta-motivation a “modality.” I am going to call each pole of a meta-motivation a “mode”**

# Apter's modalities correspond to psychoanalytic dualities we are familiar with

- **Conforming ↔ Rebelling**
- **Mastering ↔ Sympathizing**
- **Serious ↔ Playful**
- **Self-focused ↔ Other focused**
- **Oedipal dynamics or Ego ↔ Superego**
- **Paranoid-Schizoid ↔ Depressive**
- **Ego instincts- sexual instincts**
- **Narcissistic Investment ↔ Object investment**



# Apter's basic hypothesis

When a person is in a mode, and it leads to frustration, boredom, discomfort, and/or anxiety, they **"reverse"** to its other pole

Conform



OR

Rebel

Conform



## “An example from everyday life: Playing Tennis

- I am playing seriously against a competitor. I realize I can't compete and get frustrated. I decide to enjoy watching his skillful playing and take pleasure in my surroundings.
- My competitor had hoped to play hard and defeat me. Realizing I am not very good and feeling bored, he decides to give me gentle instructions on my swing.
- **I have switched from “Serious to Playful”**
- **He has switched from “Mastering to Sympathizing”**

Are Apter's modalities the "best" way to describe object relations? **There is no way to prove this!**

## In fact, theorists have provided a range of modalities

- Freud            ■ **Life instinct versus Death instinct**
- Klein            ■ **Paranoid-Schizoid versus Depressive**
- Lacan            ■ **Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real**
- Jung             ■ **Extraversion versus Introversion**
- McClelland     ■ **Power, Affiliation, Achievement**
- Higgins         ■ **Promotion vs Prevention**
- Bakan           ■ **Agency vs. Communion**

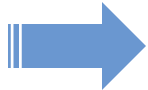
# My proposition to you

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- Whatever its epistemological standing, **Reversal Theory is a helpful way to understand workgroup behavior!**

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# How I translate Apter's modalities into workgroup modalities

## Apter's Modalities for individuals

**Conform-Rebel**

Master-Sympathize

**Serious-Playful**

**Self-focus—Other-focus**

- Translated into Work-Groups
- **Consensus-Challenge**
- **Perform-Join**
- **Purposeful-Playful**
- **Self-Attunement- Other-Attunement**

# Modalities in Group Life

- Each modality represents a '**grammar**' for group behavior
- Members **intuitively** know the rules (e.g., consensus, challenge)
  - People have an intuitive grasp of when a group is seeking consensus, focusing on coming together, fruitfully debating, etc.
- Bion described valences as “embodied unthought assumptions about the nature and purpose of the group and which all human individuals have available for linking with each other.”
  - The modalities have just this character



## Modality Descriptions: How groups work

CHALLENGE	PURFPOSUL	PEFORMING	SELF ATTUNEMENT
The group feels energetic and stimulating, as though ideas are colliding and refining each other. Members are alert, analytical, and somewhat competitive. There's a shared confidence that truth and progress come through testing, questioning, and friction.	The group feels deliberate, directed, and morally engaged. Attention is sustained and meaningful. Members speak with a sense of purpose and shared values. Work proceeds with thoughtful pacing and clarity of intention.	The group feels fluid, rhythmic, and assured. Members act with quiet coordination; the task unfolds naturally. There's confidence in shared competence—purpose has become embodied and need not be verbalized.	The group feels ambitious, alert, and competitive. Individuals emphasize their own goals, expertise, or benefit. There's pride and tension—energy directed toward securing position and recognition.
CONSESNSUS	PLAYFUL	JOINING	OTHER ATTUNEMENT
The group feels calm, affiliative, and harmonious. Members emphasize shared understanding and inclusion. Difference is recognized but gently resolved. The atmosphere conveys belonging and psychological safety.	The group feels spontaneous, lively, and creative. Rules loosen; ideas mix freely. Humor and experimentation replace solemnity. The atmosphere carries both joy and mischief—risk-taking feels safe.	The group feels warm, open, and inclusive. Belonging is central—members orient to one another more than to the task. The emotional tone is affectionate and safe.	The atmosphere feels warm, attentive, and quietly empowering. Members seem genuinely interested in one another's growth.

If you want to see a much more detailed description of these modalities, click on the following link.

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- [Workgroup modalities](#)

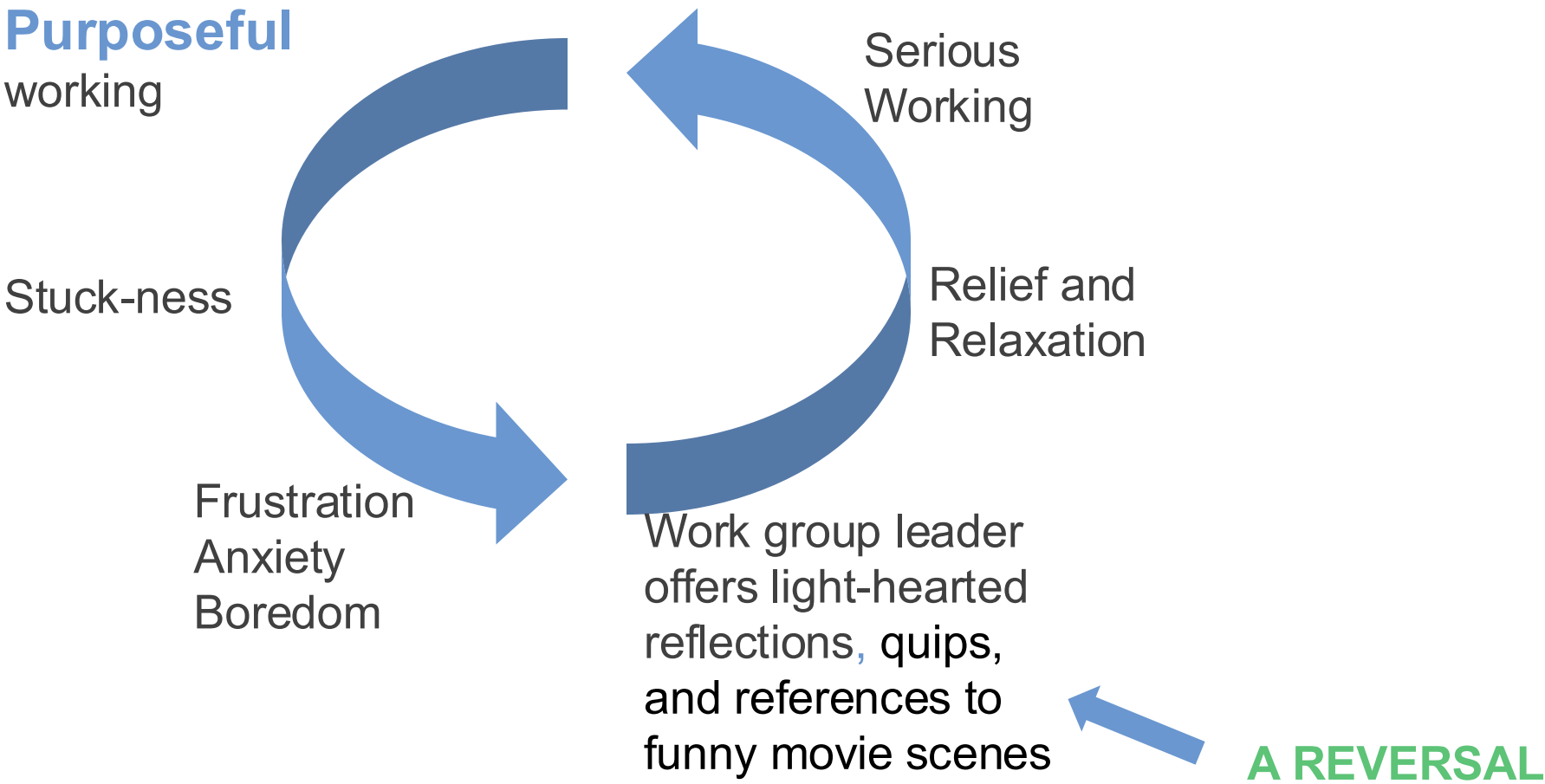
# Reversals and Work Leadership

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- Reversal helps groups use anxiety and discomfort as **signals**, not **threats**
- Responding to anxiety and discomfort, temporary 'work leaders' **guide** reversals at key moments.
- Groups that reverse effectively remain adaptive

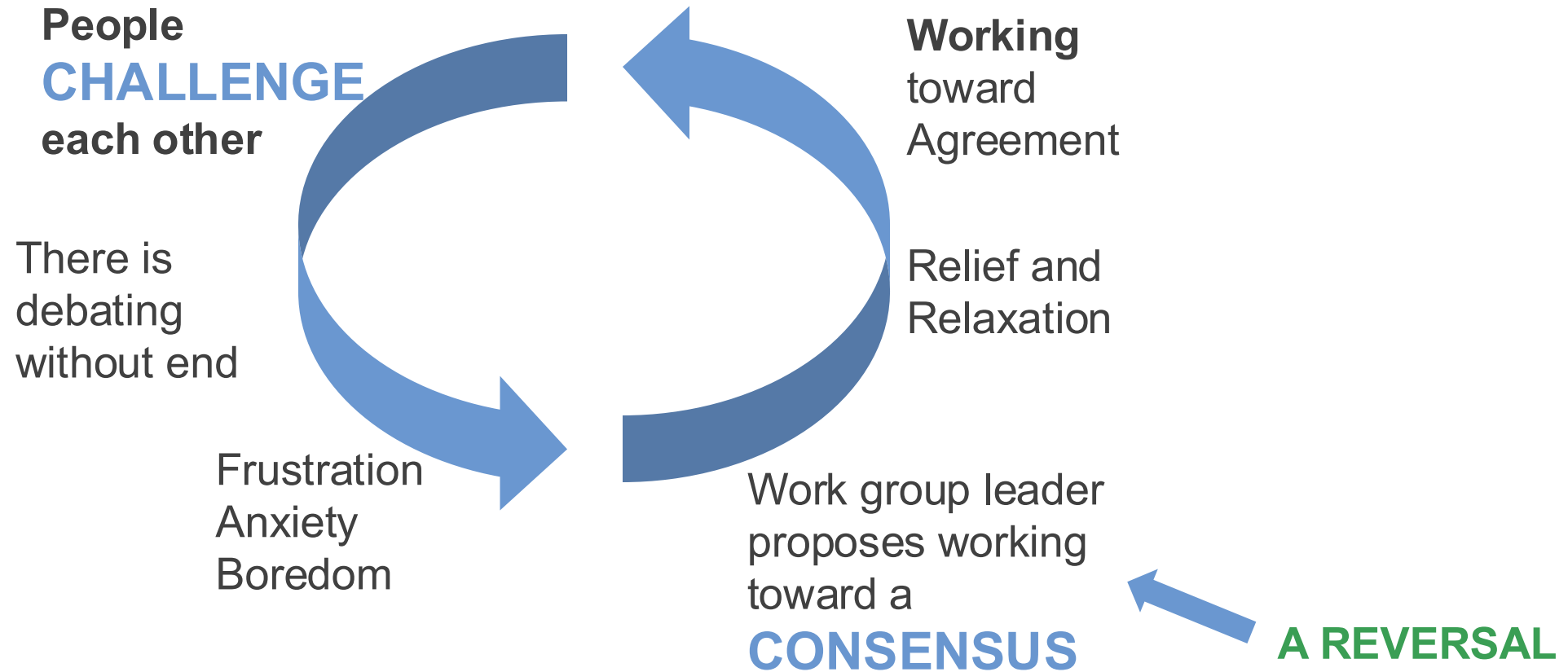
# Here is an example, a “reversal” in everyday Workgroup behavior

*A typical Workgroup experience*

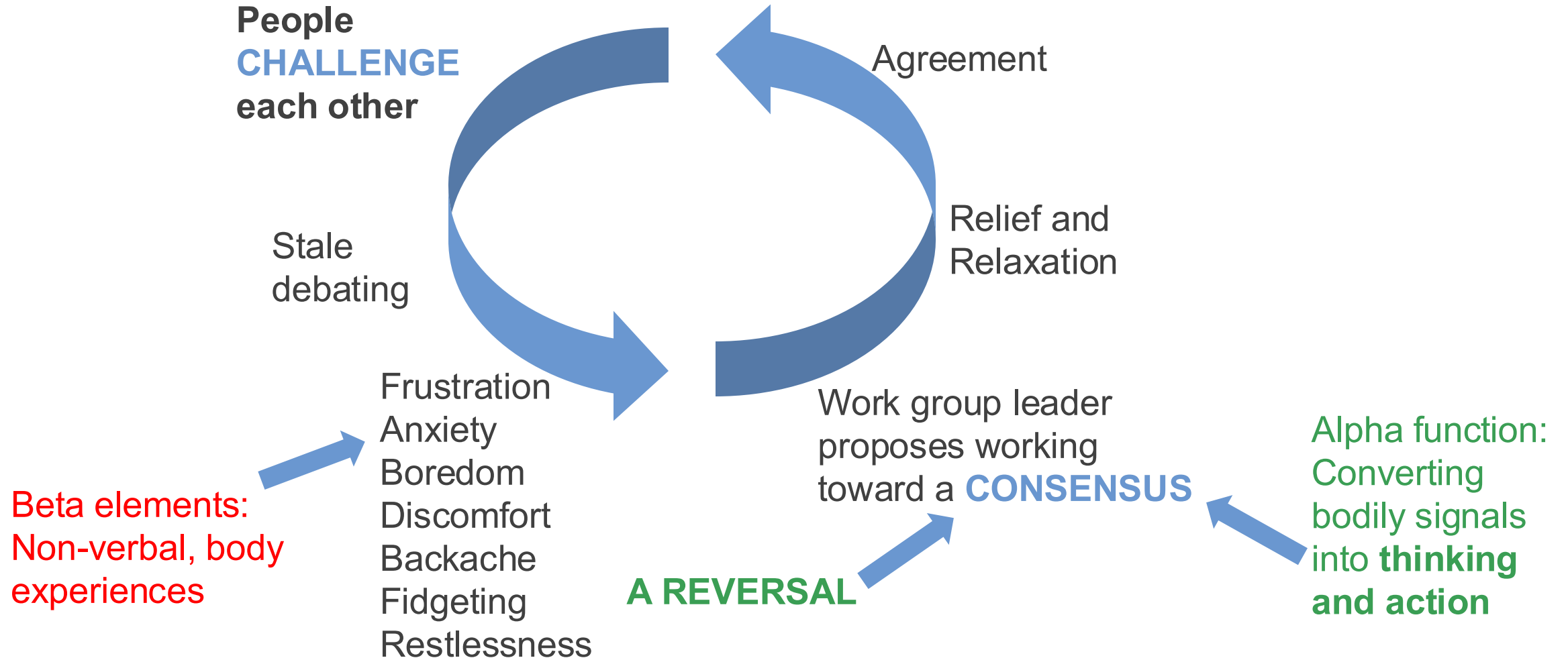


# Another example “reversal” in everyday Workgroup behavior

*A typical Workgroup experience*




# *Reversals are connected to Bion's "beta elements" and "Alpha functioning"*



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# Every mode has its "deformation," its own distinctive "BA," triggered by anxiety boredom, frustration, discomfort, etc.

- | ■ <b>MODE</b>             | ■ <b>ITS DEFORMATION</b> |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| ■ <b>Challenge</b>        | ■ <b>Fight</b>           |
| ■ <b>Consensus</b>        | ■ <b>Flight</b>          |
| ■ <b>Purposefulness</b>   | ■ <b>Dependency</b>      |
| ■ <b>Playfulness</b>      | ■ <b>Absurdity</b>       |
| ■ <b>Performing</b>       | ■ <b>Ritualizing</b>     |
| ■ <b>Joining</b>          | ■ <b>Enmeshing</b>       |
| ■ <b>Self Attunement</b>  | ■ <b>Aggrandizing</b>    |
| ■ <b>Other Attunement</b> | ■ <b>Rescuing</b>        |



## Modes and their deformations

CHALLENGE	CONSENSUS	PURPOSEFULNESS	PLAYFULNESS
<p>The group feels energetic and stimulating, as though ideas are colliding and refining each other. Members are alert, analytical, and somewhat competitive. There's a shared confidence that truth and progress come through testing, questioning, and friction.</p>	<p>The group feels calm, affiliative, and harmonious. Members emphasize shared understanding and inclusion. Difference is recognized but gently resolved.</p> <p>The atmosphere conveys belonging and psychological safety.</p>	<p>The group feels deliberate, directed, and morally engaged. Attention is sustained and meaningful. Members speak with a sense of purpose and shared values. Work proceeds with thoughtful pacing and clarity of intention.</p>	<p>The group feels spontaneous, lively, and creative. Rules loosen; ideas mix freely. Humor and experimentation replace solemnity. The atmosphere carries both joy and mischief—risk-taking feels safe.</p>
DEFORMATION: FIGHT	DEFORMATION: FLIGHT	DEFORMATION: DEPENDENCY	DEFORMATION: ABSURDITY
<p>The atmosphere is charged, combative, and morally inflamed.</p> <p>Energy that in a healthy challenge mode sharpens thinking now turns toward attack and defense. The group feels cornered or wronged — by someone inside (a rival, a leader) or someone outside (a boss, funder, regulator, or “system”).</p>	<p>The atmosphere feels placid, compliant, and oddly weightless. Members appear friendly and aligned, but beneath the surface there's avoidance of tension, risk, and difference.</p> <p>Agreement comes too quickly, decisions feel unearned.</p>	<p>The atmosphere feels docile, compliant, and quietly inert. Surface calm conceals a deeper abdication of thought and will. Where healthy Purposefulness is fueled by shared meaning, Dependency feeds on passivity — members look outward for instruction, approval, or rescue.</p>	<p>The group feels giddy, scattered, and unserious.</p> <p>Where healthy playfulness releases creativity, silliness releases tension without insight. Energy is high but unfocused—members joke, tease, and riff endlessly, creating a carnival-like atmosphere.</p>

## Modes and their deformations

PERFORMING	JOINING	SELF-ATTUNEMENT	OTHER-ATTUNEMENT
The group feels fluid, rhythmic, and assured. Members act with quiet coordination; the task unfolds naturally. There's confidence in shared competence—purpose has become embodied and need not be verbalized.	The group feels warm, open, and inclusive. Belonging is central—members orient to one another more than to the task. The emotional tone is affectionate and safe.	The group feels ambitious, alert, and competitive. Individuals emphasize their own goals, expertise, or benefit. There's pride and tension—energy directed toward securing position and recognition.	The atmosphere feels warm, attentive, and quietly empowering. Members seem genuinely interested in one another's growth. The tone is encouraging, respectful, and spacious —
DEFORMATION: RITUALIZING	DEFORMATION: ENMESHING	DEFORM: AGGRANDIZING	DEFORMATION:RESCUING
The atmosphere feels controlled, serious, and airless. Every action seems correct, but nothing feels alive. Where healthy performance carries rhythm and flow, this group works as if on rails—precise but joyless.	The atmosphere feels soft, warm, and enveloping. There is a pervasive sense of friendliness and inclusion—everyone belongs, everyone is “us.” But beneath the warmth lies fusion: boundaries blur, differences dissolve, and individuality feels quietly unsafe.	The atmosphere feels charged, competitive, and subtly hierarchical. Where healthy self-assertion brings vitality and candor, aggrandizing introduces tension and guardedness. Status becomes the invisible currency: who gets credit, who speaks last, whose ideas dominate.	The atmosphere feels tender, protective, and slightly sentimental. There is an almost moral glow to the group's warmth—goodness is its shared currency. But beneath the kindness lies over-identification and emotional overreach

# Why does a deformation succeed?

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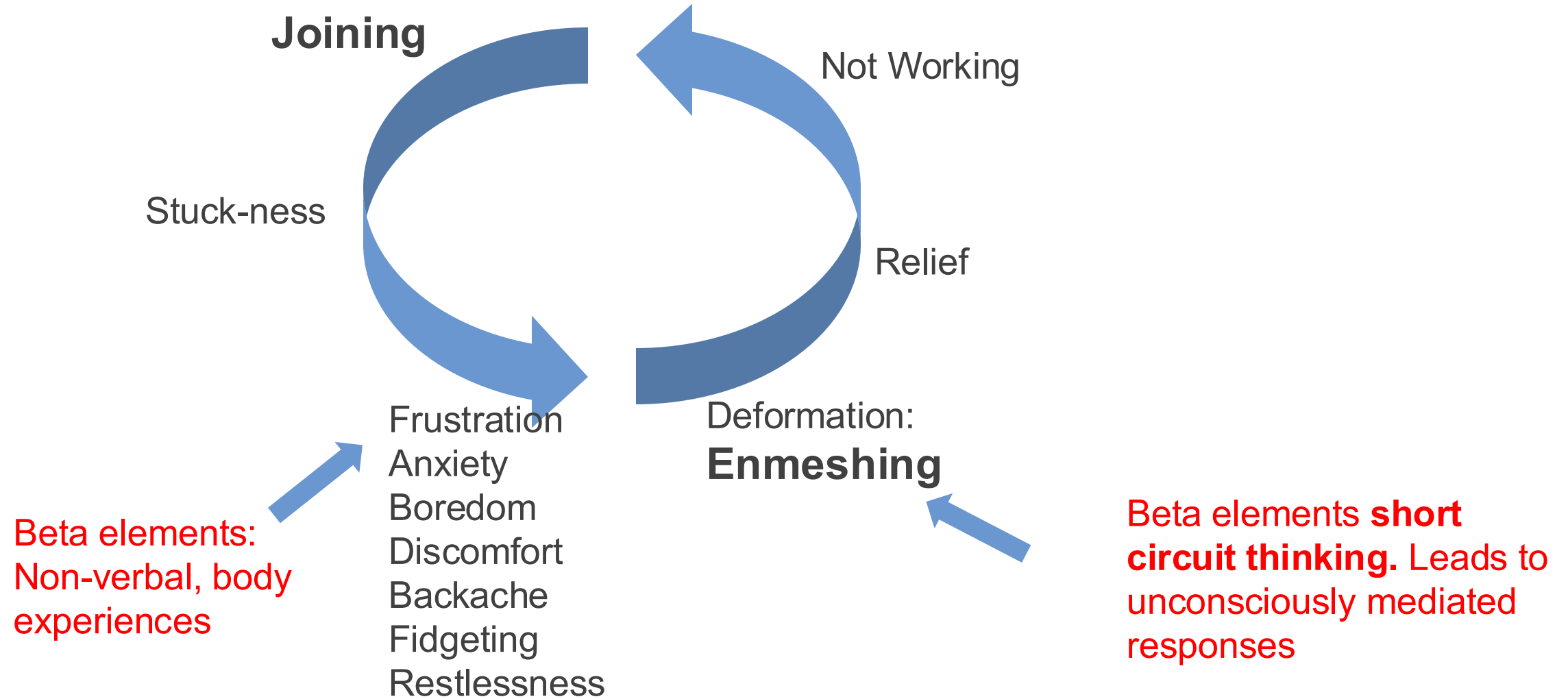
The deformation succeeds for three reasons:

- It provides **an escape** from hard work
- It **hijacks** the feeling associated with a work mode and distorts it. In this sense, it is “disguised” as a working process when it is not.
- It provides its own distinctive source of **gratification**, as is shown in the next slide.

# Deformations are partly gratifying

Fight	<b>The energy of a fight is enlivening</b>
Flight	<b>A pseudo consensus is reassuring</b>
Dependency	<b>Having no responsibility is comforting</b>
Absurdity	<b>Foolishness is a pleasant diversion</b>
Ritualizing	<b>Procedures reduce the burden of choosing</b>
Enmeshing	<b>Entanglements provide a sense of security</b>
Aggrandizing	<b>Invoking deference makes me feel superior</b>
Rescuing	<b>It feels good to be a moral person</b>

# With a deformation the beta elements dominate



# The deformations and the basic assumptions


- Bion posited three basic assumptions. Reversal Theory (RT) points to **eight** deformations
- RT's deformation, "merging" matches, Turquet's addition of "**one-ness**" to Bion's canonical three. RT's deformation, "aggrandizing," matches Lawrence and his co-authors' addition of "**me-ness**." These matches increase the face validity of RT as a framework for understanding group psychodynamics
- RT adds, "ritualizing," "rescuing," and "absurdity."
- RT does **not** give an account of Bion's "**pairing**" basic assumption.

# The deformations and the basic assumptions: continued

- One **dilemma** associated with Bion's framework is that the Basic Assumptions represent a flight from work and, at the same time, serve as the emotional drivers of real work. For example, according to Bion, the feelings associated with “fight” and “dependency” also amplify people's efforts to face challenges or follow a leader.
- RT proposes a way out of this dilemma by distinguishing the **mode from its deformation**.
- For example, the feelings associated with the “challenge” mode help people tackle complex problems, whereas its deformation into “fight” leads people to attack each other. **Each has its own source of emotional fuel.**
- RT can resolve this dilemma because it provides a **typology of working**, which Bion's framework does **not**.

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# There are four categories of interpretations that focus on the work

- **Supporting a mode:** Underlining a mode that is helping a group stay on task
- **Interpreting a frustration**, anxiety, etc. (giving voice to Beta elements), when the mode has run its course and can no longer support work
- **Interpreting a deformation** by referencing the gratification it provides
- **Supporting a reversal** that a work leader proposes to restore working.

# Interventions and Interpretations: Challenge to Consensus

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- **Supporting a mode**
  - **Interpreting a frustration**
  - **Interpreting a deformation**
  - **Supporting a reversal**
- “The group is experiencing its debate as fruitful.”
  - “It seems that you are debating without end.”
  - The group is taking pleasure in fighting
  - The group is looking for a basis for agreement

# Interventions and Interpretations: Consensus to Challenge

- **Supporting a mode**
  - **Interpreting a frustration**
  - **Interpreting a deformation**
  - **Supporting a reversal**
- “The group is exploring areas of agreement.”
  - “You are going in circles.”
  - “It feels comfortable to paper over differences.”
  - “It may be time to revive your debating skills.”

# Interventions and Interpretations: Performing to Joining

- **Supporting a mode**
  - **Interpreting a frustration\**
  - **Interpreting a deformation**
  - **Supporting a reversal**
- “The group’s work feels like smooth sailing.”
  - “It seems that you have lost direction.”
  - “Your procedures could be your death knell.”
  - “The group is trying to glue itself back together again.”

# Interventions and Interpretations: Joining to Performing

- **Supporting a mode**
  - **Interpreting a frustration**
  - **Interpreting a deformation**
  - **Supporting a reversal**
- “You are looking for what you have in common.”
  - “Feeling good about one another is not enough.”
  - It is pleasurable to experience, “one for all and all for one!”
  - “The group is trying to return to its work, even though it's hard.”

# Interventions and Interpretations: Purposefulness to Playful

- **Supporting a mode**
  - **Interpreting a frustration**
  - **Interpreting a deformation**
  - Supporting a reversal
- “You are working with great intention.”
  - “Many members appear to be lost.”
  - “It is comforting when someone else defines your goal.”
  - “Having fun can be a release.”

# Interventions and Interpretations: Playful to Purposefulness

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- **Supporting a mode**
  - **Interpreting a frustration**
  - **Interpreting a deformation**
  - **Supporting a Reversal**
- “Hunor can be enlivening.”
  - “When does fun get in the way of work?”
  - It feels like a carnival here.”
  - “It seems that some members feel that you are wasting time.”

# Interventions and Interpretations: Self-Other attunement

- **Supporting a mode**
  - **Interpreting a frustration**
  - **Interpreting a deformation**
  - **Supporting a reversal**
- “It seems important to assert your different viewpoints.”
  - “Your competitiveness is undermining your work.”
  - “It appears that it is most important that everyone gets credit for their contributions.”
  - Silent members are finding support.”



# Interventions and Interpretations: Other-Self attunement

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- **Supporting a mode**
  - **Interpreting a frustration**
  - **Interpreting a deformation**
  - **Supporting a reversal**
- “Caring for each other is important.”
  - “ Good feelings can’t substitute for good thinking”
  - “You have labeled some members as injured.”
  - “Sometimes singletons can pave the way.”

# These are not the only interventions

- These interventions focus on the group's **capacity for work** and are laser-focused on when a group is "**off-task**" or "**on-task**."
- But that does not mean that other dynamics are not in play, for example, sub-grouping and stereotyping. It also does not preclude attention to other feelings, for example, envy, pride, joy, and passion.
- **It is a matter of judgment** to know when these other feelings and dynamics help or hinder a group's capacity for working.
- There are **four "extreme" feelings, with their associated attenuated expressions**, associated with each modality. I will demonstrate this at another time.

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# Primitive Group Functioning

- It may be thought that the Basic assumptions, as “**proto-mental**” phenomena, represent primitive group functioning
- But this can't be right, since the Basic Assumptions are also partially **constructive**: they hold the group together despite its failure to accomplish real work. As Bion notes, group members **assume** that the purpose of the group is to “depend” or to “fight.” In people's minds the groups still has a purpose which embraces everyone.
- I prefer Lia Pistiner di Cortinias' phraseology: “The usurpation of ego functions by a **primitive Super-ego** is also linked to the primitive group functioning.” \* In other words, we want to define primitivity as primarily **destructive** in its intent and impact.

\*Pistiner de Cortiñas, Lia (2011). “**Science and fiction in the psychoanalytical field.**” In Chris Mawson (Ed.), *Bion Today*(New Library of Psychoanalysis). London & New York: Routledge, p. 126

# Reversal Theory terms guide us in connecting primitive group function to modes and their deformations

MODE	DEFORMATION	PRIMITIVE EXPRESSION
Challenge	Fight	Destroy
Consensus	Flight	Repudiate
Purposeful	Dependency	Be a Parasite
Playfulness	Absurdity	Derision
Performing	Ritualizing	Persecuting
Joining	Enmeshing	Merging
Self-Attunement	Aggrandizing	Predation
Other-Attunement	Rescuing	Smothering

## The following four slides..

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- Describe the **group climate** associated with the **primitive function** of each mode.
- Place the description of each primitive variant next to the description of its corresponding mode and deformation
- By reading the group climate descriptions of each triad in **its entirety**, the mode, the deformation, and the primitive variant, we can develop **some intuition** about how a work group may **regress** to a primitive group

# PRIMITIVE STATES

CHALLENGE	DEFORMATION: FIGHT	PRIMITIVE: DESTROY
The atmosphere is charged, combative, and morally inflamed. Energy that in a healthy challenge mode sharpens thinking now turns toward attack and defense. The group feels cornered or wronged — by someone inside (a rival, a leader) or someone outside (a boss, funder, regulator, or “system”).	The atmosphere is charged, combative, and morally inflamed. Energy that in a healthy challenge mode sharpens thinking now turns toward attack and defense. The group feels cornered or wronged — by someone inside (a rival, a leader) or someone outside (a boss, funder, regulator, or “system”).	the group is no longer trying to argue or even fight, but to annihilate. The other side is treated as a contamination to be eliminated, with attacks shifting from ideas to reputations, livelihoods, and belonging. The task and even the institution become collateral damage as any move toward repair or compromise is condemned as betrayal.
CONSENSUS	FLIGHT	PRIMITIVE : REPUDIATE
The group feels calm, affiliative, and harmonious. Members emphasize shared understanding and inclusion. Difference is recognized but gently resolved. The atmosphere conveys belonging and psychological safety.	The atmosphere feels placid, compliant, and oddly weightless. Members appear friendly and aligned, but beneath the surface there’s avoidance of tension, risk, and difference. Agreement comes too quickly, decisions feel unearned.	The group has not just drifted into pseudo-consensus has withdrawn recognition of the task itself. The mandate is treated as illegitimate, corrupt, or simply “not ours,” and any genuine engagement with it feels like collusion. What looks from the outside like passivity or agreement is, from the inside, a shared conviction that the task does not deserve their effort.

PURPOSEFUL	DEFORMATION: DEPENDENCY	PRIMITIVE: PARASITISM
<p>The group feels deliberate, directed, and morally engaged. Attention is sustained and meaningful. Members speak with a sense of purpose and shared values. Work proceeds with thoughtful pacing and clarity of intention.</p>	<p>The atmosphere feels docile, compliant, and quietly inert. Surface calm conceals a deeper abdication of thought and will. Where healthy Purposefulness is fueled by shared meaning, Dependency feeds on passivity—members look outward for instruction, approval, or rescue.</p>	<p>the group treats the leader, consultant, or host organization less as a partner than as a life-support system to be fed on. There is intense dependence but little reciprocity. Complaints and demands proliferate, but contributions thin out; any invitation to take ownership feels like an imposition or a trick. The underlying climate is one of quiet extraction—<b><i>we will grab what you offer, but we will not ever pay you back</i></b></p>
PLAYFULNESS	DEFORMATION: ABSURDITY	PRIMITIVE: DERISION
<p>The group feels spontaneous, lively, and creative. Rules loosen; ideas mix freely. Humor and experimentation replace solemnity. The atmosphere carries both joy and mischief—risk-taking feels safe.</p>	<p>The group feels giddy, scattered, and unserious. Where healthy playfulness releases creativity, silliness releases tension without insight. Energy is high but unfocused—members joke, tease, and riff endlessly, creating a carnival-like atmosphere.</p>	<p>The group bonds through contemptuous humor. Members compete to spot and exaggerate others' foibles, injuring people with jokes that everyone is expected to find funny. Outsiders are cast as fools, and the group imagines itself as the only truly “with it” circle, surrounded by jokers who deserve mockery. The climate is sharp and witty on the surface but organized around putting others down rather than understanding them.</p>



<b>PERFORMING</b>	<b>DEFORMATION: RITUALIZING</b>	<b>PRIMITIVE: PERSECUTING</b>
The group feels fluid, rhythmic, and assured. Members act with quiet coordination; the task unfolds naturally. There's confidence in shared competence—purpose has become embodied and need not be verbalized.	The atmosphere feels controlled, serious, and airless. Every action seems correct, but nothing feels alive. Where healthy performance carries rhythm and flow, this group works as if on rails—precise but joyless.	the group's main task becomes policing one another. Discussion is tightly controlled, and any deviation from rules or norms is treated as an offense to be exposed and corrected. Members speak cautiously or fall silent, as procedures and standards are used less to coordinate action than to punish, creating a climate of anxious conformity.
<b>JOINING</b>	<b>DEFORMATION: ENMESHING</b>	<b>PRIMITIVE: MERGING</b>
The group feels warm, open, and inclusive. Belonging is central—members orient to one another more than to the task. The emotional tone is affectionate and safe.	The atmosphere feels soft, warm, and enveloping. There is a pervasive sense of friendliness and inclusion—everyone belongs, everyone is “us.” But beneath the warmth lies fusion: boundaries blur, differences dissolve, and individuality feels quietly unsafe.	In the group loyalty is equated with emotional sameness. Any “I” that diverges from the prevailing “we” is felt as disloyal or even treacherous, a quiet betrayal of the bond. Members preemptively edit or abandon their own perceptions so as not to be the one who breaks the spell. The climate is one of vigilant togetherness, where difference is feared less as conflict than as a sign you no longer truly belong.

<b>SELF-ATTUENMENT</b>	<b>DEFORMATION: AGGRANDIZING</b>	<b>PRIMNITIVE: PREDATION</b>
<p>The group feels ambitious, alert, and competitive. Individuals emphasize their own goals, expertise, or benefit. There's pride and tension—energy directed toward securing position and recognition.</p>	<p>"The atmosphere feels charged, competitive, and subtly hierarchical.</p> <p>Where healthy self-assertion brings vitality and candor, aggrandizing introduces tension and guardedness Status becomes the invisible currency: who gets credit, who speaks last, whose ideas dominate."</p>	<p>the group's energy turns toward hunting rather than working. Status and safety feel tied to finding someone weaker to beat, expose, or sacrifice. People scan for vulnerability and move in with a mix of charm and cruelty. Success is measured by who gets protected and who gets eaten, creating a climate of sharp vigilance and fear: today we feed on others; tomorrow we might be the prey..</p>
<b>OTHER AtTUNEMENT</b>	<b>DEFORMATION: RESCUING</b>	<b>PRIMITIVE: SMOTHERING</b>
<p>The atmosphere feels warm, attentive, and quietly empowering.</p> <p>Members seem genuinely interested in one another's growth.</p> <p>The tone is encouraging, respectful, and spacious —</p>	<p>The atmosphere feels tender, protective, and slightly sentimental.</p> <p>There is an almost moral glow to the group's warmth—goodness is its shared currency.</p> <p>But beneath the kindness lies over-identification and emotional overreach</p>	<p>the group's caring becomes intrusive and controlling. Members rush to "help" in ways that override wishes and erase autonomy; saying no or asking for space is treated as rejection. What began as rescuing hardens into a climate where people are not allowed to struggle, set limits, or simply breathe on their own.</p>

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# Creating a code for observing groups

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Each mode entails a triad: the mode itself, its deformation, and its primitive variant. There are, therefore,  $8 \times 3 = 24$  different states that a work group can occupy.

We can create a coding sheet of easy-to-recall acronyms and a corresponding sheet for marking down observations

We can develop "scenarios in the mind" of how groups move from one position to another. For example, a group can turn primitive by moving from fighting to destroying. Or a group focused on rescuing its injured members can turn to smothering them.

But our best recourse is to start by observing groups using our categories.

The following slides provide draft coding sheets and an observation sheet

## A coding sheet for observing work groups: Part 1

Mode Family	Level	Code	Mode Triad	One-line cue
Challenge	Working	<b>CH1</b>	Challenge	<b>Energetic testing of ideas; friction sharpens thinking.</b>
Challenge	Deformation	<b>CH2</b>	Fight	<b>Combative, morally inflamed exchanges; attack and defense dominate.</b>
Challenge	Primitive	<b>CH3</b>	Destroy	<b>Aim is to annihilate the other side, even at the cost of the task or relationship.</b>
Consensus	Working	<b>C01</b>	Consensus	<b>Open exchange leading to genuine, thought-through agreement.</b>
Consensus	Deformation	<b>C02</b>	Flight	<b>Surface agreement that smooths over conflict and real differences.</b>
Consensus	Primitive	<b>C03</b>	Repudiate	<b>The group tacitly disowns the task as illegitimate or “not ours.”</b>
Purposeful	Working	<b>PU1</b>	Purposeful	<b>Focused, intentional engagement with a clear sense of meaning and direction.</b>
Purposeful	Deformation	<b>PU2</b>	Dependency	<b>Looking to others for direction and initiative; reluctance to act autonomously.</b>
Purposeful	Primitive	<b>PU3</b>	Be a Parasite	<b>Living off others' effort or authority while withholding one's own contribution.</b>
Playfulness	Working	<b>PL1</b>	Playfulness	<b>Light, flexible, creative play that still connects to the work.</b>
Playfulness	Deformation	<b>PL2</b>	Absurdity	<b>Random or silly joking that detaches from meaning or task.</b>
Playfulness	Primitive	<b>PL3</b>	Derision	<b>Bonding through contemptuous humor, treating others as fools to be mocked.</b>

## A coding sheet for observing work groups: Part 2

Performing	Working	<b>PF1</b>	Performing	<b>People take roles and do the work in a coordinated, effective way.</b>
Performing	Deformation	<b>PF2</b>	Ritualizing	<b>Going through the motions and procedures with little real engagement.</b>
Performing	Primitive	<b>PF3</b>	Persecuting	<b>Using rules or standards to shame, catch out, or punish deviation.</b>
Joining	Working	<b>JN1</b>	Joining	<b>Warm, inclusive connection that still allows difference and individuality.</b>
Joining	Deformation	<b>JN2</b>	Enmeshing	<b>Soft, enveloping closeness where boundaries blur and individuality feels unsafe.</b>
Joining	Primitive	<b>JN3</b>	Merging	<b>Fused “we” in which dissent feels like betrayal of the bond.</b>
Self-Attunement	Working	<b>ST1</b>	Self-Attunement	<b>Awareness of one’s own stake, limits, and impact without one-upmanship.</b>
Self-Attunement	Deformation	<b>ST2</b>	Aggrandizing	<b>Inflating self-importance and needing to be seen as superior or central.</b>
Self-Attunement	Primitive	<b>ST3</b>	Predation	<b>Seeking status by hunting, exposing, or sacrificing the weaker.</b>
Other-Attunement	Working	<b>OT1</b>	Other-Attunement	<b>Attuned care that respects others’ autonomy, limits, and competence.</b>
Other-Attunement	Deformation	<b>OT2</b>	Rescuing	<b>Over-helping so others don’t have to struggle, feel discomfort, or own the work.</b>
Other-Attunement	Primitive	<b>OT3</b>	Smothering	<b>Intrusive “care” that will not allow distance, limits, or self-reliance.</b>

## An observation sheet

		MINUTES					
	Mode Triad	00-10	10-20	20-30	30-40	40-50	50-60
<b>Code</b>							
CH1	Challenge						
CH2	Fight						
CH3	Destroy						
CO1	Consensus						
CO2	Flight						
CO3	Repudiate						
PU1	Purposeful						
PU2	Dependency						
PU3	Be a Parasite						
PL1	Playfulness						
PL2	Absurdity						
PL3	Derision						
PF1	Performing						
PF2	Ritualizing						
PF3	Persecuting						
JN1	Joining						
JN2	Enmeshing						
JN3	Merging						
ST1	Self-Attune						
ST2	Aggrandizing						
ST3	Predation						
OT1	Other-Attune						
OT2	Rescuing						
OT3	Smothering						



# The observation sheet looks more complicated than it is

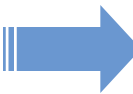
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- Group dynamics is likely characterized by patterns and regularities. For example, a group may cycle within rather than across a triad, or undergo predictable reversals, e.g., from Challenge to Consensus, when they remain within a work mode.
- But only observations will confirm or disconfirm this.

# Sections

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- Purpose of this presentation
- Reversal Theory
- Reversal Theory and the Workgroup modalities
- The Deformations and the Basic Assumptions
- Describe potential interventions to help groups work
- Primitive functioning
- Observing groups
- Next steps



## Some possible next steps

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- Review the more detailed spreadsheet of modalities and their deformations
- Read Michael Apter's latest book: His latest is *ZigZag: Reversal and Paradox in Human Personality*
- Try using these RT Workgroup categories informally in your everyday work.
- Test these ideas with colleagues.
- Use/revise the proposed coding and observation sheets.
- Establish a study group to test and advance this framework.
- Report on our observations.