

## Stahl Dynamics in Groups

No less than Friedemann Schulz von Thun wrote the preface for this 400-page book by Eberhard Stahl, in which he tells us about the exciting experience in group dynamics of the 70s and their importance when working with groups. "Had we only known all this at the time! And if I had a free wish today, I would go for this: that this book be part of the general education in this country soon." (All quotations are translated.)

For the well-disposed reader's information: Schulz von Thun has been working with Stahl at the Hamburg *Arbeitskreis Kommunikation und Klärungshilfe* (Work Group Communication and Clarification Support) for many years.

And? Is the book by Eberhard Stahl up to this accolade by Friedemann Schulz von Thun?

The answer is an unreserved "yes".

As a trainer I cover the topic of group dynamics in seminars lasting several days, so I have examined the market of available books on the subject quite thoroughly. Stahl's book really stands out here. And it does so in many ways.

The haptic experience alone is already quite special and makes you get over the purchase price of 39 euros: It is a "proper" book, not a paperback but a clothbound hardcover. The paper is of a remarkably high quality, the design and typeface... really done in an excellently caring and professional way. It is a book that you really enjoy holding and you often take it up, without making it suffer.

But this is only the outer view, let's now look at the inner values.

Stahl has subdivided his book into four well-structured areas:

1. The Driving Forces
2. The Process
3. The Structure
4. The Practice

If you are looking for information on group dynamics, you will make a wonderful find here. It is a comprehensive book which leaves few gaps. I will say more about this at the end.

Stahl has written this book for people who want to deeply enter the topic of group leadership, bearing responsibility to develop and promote the groups as coaches, supervisors, leaders, team managers, trainers and others (p. XXIII).

Stahl is thorough and very clearly structured in his way to proceed and yet writes in an intelligible style, without frills but with the right amount of redundancy. Wherever it makes sense throughout the whole book you will find examples. In my opinion he offers them at the right moments, which really shows his practical experience.

In Part 1, "The Driving Forces", Stahl explains theoretical foundations on self-organisation and evaluation of social systems. Here he shows which kinds of objectives people carry into groups, how group contracts develop, which role the coach plays in this context and what is decisive for whether objectives can be achieved or not. The aspects of the objectives and the contract, in particular, are explained in detail.

In the Part 2, "The Process", Stahl dedicates a lot of text, i.e. 160 pages, to Tuckman's extended model with now five phases. He examines the different phases truly comprehensively and from all sides. Each time he uses five different focuses as a repetitive pattern in the phases: 1. The Group, 2. The Individuals, 3. Complications, 4. The Group Climate, 5. Interventions.

In my view, coaches or leaders will not need more information on Tuckman's model than they can find here in Stahl's book and at any rate they won't find more anywhere else. The only remaining question is why the virtual phase before the official group start isn't finally taken up as a phase in its own right.

In Part 3, "The Structure", Stahl introduces the coordinate system developed by Riemann and Thomann. Thomann, who also belongs to the work group, sensibly extended Riemann's classic about anxiety ("Grundformen der Angst") from 1961 in 1988. The 110 pages of Part 3 excellently present persons and groups with regard to their structures. The extended Riemann model is a great and versatile tool and it should be mentioned as a particularly positive feature that Riemann sensibly describes the concepts of neurosis theory he uses (schizoid, compulsive, depressive, hysterical) with the terms closeness, distance and duration and change. Stahl also introduces it in ever new deliberations. This section alone would have been worth a separate book.

At the end of Part 4, "The Practice", Stahl uses two practical examples to transfer the well-introduced theory into practice. Oh, in how many other "handbooks" have I missed this! Nobody needs to read Part 4 but it helps to get to the transfer level after the comprehensive input, which alone shows whether the reader has sufficiently understood the subject of group dynamics to be competent to use it.

Only the second edition from 2007 has a Chapter 16 at the end of the book. Here, Stahl takes up concrete feedback from the first years after publishing the first edition. It is mostly frustrating experience made by coaches who had to state that neither were they particularly popular in their work nor seriously appreciated in the presented structures, especially regarding the concrete implementation in their everyday work life. Hence the frustrating feedback experience made by some coaches: "Your pastoral holiday approach probably isn't completely suitable for our poor-sinner work life", puts the reason for the new chapter into a nutshell. Stahl offers helpful hints for the self-conception of coaches and the momentum and self-organisation of groups, thus very much encouraging practitioners. But it is quite obvious that the chapter was added on subsequently.

Now what is missing? Little! But in view of the thoroughness of Stahl's work it remains a question why the rank dynamics model after Raoul Schindler with alpha, beta, gamma and omega personalities isn't even mentioned. Even more so as in my opinion the title "handbook" absolutely requires its presentation, for the sake of completeness. So what we have to do is refer to the excellent book "Teamarbeit, Teamentwicklung, Teamberatung: Ein Praxisbuch für die Arbeit in und mit Teams" (Team work, team development, team consulting: a practical book for the work in and with teams) by Manfred Gellert and Claus Nowak.

But in the end we can congratulate Eberhard Stahl on this excellent book. In my view it is an absolute "must-have" for anyone who works with teams and groups, be it as a coach, leader, trainer or supervisor.