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Attending to the Nervous System of the I and the WE

In this paper, we highlight the insights gained while exploring the role of the nervous system, experienced both individually and collectively, through group dynamics in integral facilitation.

Before we dive into the insights, it feels appropriate to briefly define what we mean by “nervous system”. For us the nervous system, is a complex relational system that is central to both the experience and the functioning of our body-minds. It is relational insofar as it connects “parts” of ourselves “internally” as well as, supports our “external” connection-making. The big focus for us here is that our nervous systems **offer a way of knowing and understanding our body-minds and the body-minds of those around us, that is in and of our direct felt experience**. That is to say it isn't primarily mental activity nor the mental content of thinking. Rather, the nervous system offers a deeper and in some ways faster source of communication, as long as we can hear it and cultivate it.

While we didn't set out from the beginning to explore this topic, it has been relevant since day one. In some ways, it feels as though this topic choose us, because it was such a big feature of our experience. Particularly because we had a member of the pod whose nervous system was so fragile and so frayed that we couldn't ignore it. It took several weeks and multiple tries at connection and cohesion, before we turned to our direct experience of the nervous system. In what follows we share some of what we learned along the way.

1. All is not well

Insight There are multiple signs and signals of a depleting nervous system (individual and group)

- Members need space to talk about their lives and they share their stress and difficulties and this need begins to subsume the group's time and energy
- Deep listening to each other wavers
- Individual members are disrespectful of group expectations, norms and ground rules when attending calls
- Adherence to ground rules wavers; group members and facilitators don't feel confident that they can refer back to them without causing further disturbance
- Members begin to rely on outside connections and want to draw on outside support
- Temptation is there for members to have sideline conversations. Potential to scapegoat the member who is most disruptive
- Little progress is being made on the tasks that the group has been given
- The group may lower its expectations of what it can achieve
- Tension points are overlooked and seemingly not safe to explore

- Participants vary widely in what is nurturing to their nervous system, there is allowance of behaviour that may be detrimental to other group members
- The group is forced to stop and “be” with one another where members are at, being is privileged over doing
- The group has a deeply vivid experience of the nervous system and they question their own coping strategies

2. The effect on the group members and the facilitator

Insight: Group members’ inability to address competing commitments and manage expectations of self and other when playing various roles comes to the fore. Members revert to the group climate, which seems to be that it is safe to talk about one’s personal situation while other members offer support. However, it is not safe to talk about what it is like to be in this group.

For example: One member of the group preferred to walk and talk looking away from the camera while on group calls, while the other members understood that this was calming for this member’s nervous system - this was not the effect on the other 3 members. And this action of allowing and hence privileging the I over the We was detrimental in the longer term, to the group’s nervous system and the group’s ability to cohere.

Insight: The facilitator needs to shift the intention to the calming of the system before the work can continue. The facilitator may experience the appearance and desire of the group getting back on track as inauthentic. The work then needs to surface this pretence, working with the group’s vulnerability rather than denial and assisting them to find their resilience. The result through deeper reflection - the group delivers something of value to themselves and other external parties.

2.1 The Role of Peacekeeping.

“Peacekeeping” can be a response that members engage as a way to deal with the frayed nervous systems. A need to share “love” and positive regard can occur after initial conflict. It can act as a barrier to block and bury further conflict.

Insight: The Fake it till you Make it approach. At the time, it felt comforting to members to “share the love” but upon reflection they agreed that it was somewhat inauthentic and overly optimistic.

Part of this peacekeeping impulse was an experience of push back between two of the other members of the group. One member reflected later that she felt safe to push back against one member but not the other member who was the most disruptive and unstable. The process was not explored fully at the time. The result created a container where becoming smaller and quieter not braver became the norm, hence...

Insight: A presenting and larger force affecting the nervous system of a group can hijack and subsume smaller and more nuanced hiccups from being properly explored and dealt with; as well as subtler states of experience that can deepen our awareness and the depth of our work!

This impulse not to disrupt the container continued further when the group decided some time later to have intermittent timeouts to check in with their nervous systems but the facilitator did not follow through with this decision because she was concerned about disrupting the flow.

Insight: Committing to our decisions and intentions as a grounding place for all members as we work to rebuild a more robust nervous system and then continue to check usefulness with the group of any intervention or suggested action.

3. Bringing health back into the system

Insight: members agreed that simply coming back to the ground rules and stated expectations at the beginning of each call would have been very helpful for encouraging and maintaining a safer container.

Insight: individual capacity building is required to build member and group awareness of our own nervous system. Adding time-out aspects into the facilitation can assist members to access their nervous systems and listen in to what is emerging, building capacity to maintain closer contact with this internal voice.

Insight: Like face to face meetings, virtual meetings present challenges to group participants to be **all in**. Discussing and deciding on Virtual meeting room protocol and ground rules for participants that will attend to creating and maintaining a healthy container are paramount. When the container is solid this media provides a deeply connective and powerful tool for meaningful work.

4. Assessment of Recovery

Insight: awareness is needed to assess if the group's nervous system is now sufficiently calmed and can return to building robustness and performing. We might look to these indices:

- The group leans in towards more difficult or deep conversations
- There is coherence and differentiation, it feels safer to flow between these
- The group begins to perform
- Smaller issues get surfaced, feelings expressed and participants move on
- Members can hold each other accountable to ground rules
- Members are able to speak authentically without fear that the system will implode
- There is an aliveness in the group that hadn't been evident in the weeks prior
- The pacing changes and there is more flow in the rhythm
- There is conversation of one's own and group needs being surfaced, heard and met
- There is shared respect, increased joy and creativity

5. Moving Forward

Insight: To recognise that individuals within a group are at different developmental levels and as facilitators to be able to attend to these differing levels in a way which allows the group to “work/play/explore” together, is an active and reflective capacity without favouring or catering to one individual's experience for the sake of the whole.

Insight: Having notes of meetings was very helpful for reflection and discovery. Individuals used the group's extensive meeting notes to revisit and review what happened in our group, which allowed the group to revisit some experiences that had been buried or not fully understood at the time. Once the group's nervous system had calmed we were able to reconnect to these experiences and this enlivened the group's capacity to grow.

Insight: It is vital to acknowledge what affect others' actions and our interpersonal behaviours have on one's nervous system. It is also important to own your own anxiety and life stories and situation and notice how one brings these to each meeting as well. The group developed a shortened check in: asking what members are aware of in their nervous systems that they are bringing into the meeting today.

Insight: To prepare oneself for meetings by scheduling a bit of time before the call for calming and connecting with oneself. Recognizing that transitions can be challenging to the nervous system.

Insight: When members have chosen to silence their frustration to survive and then the system recovers and builds more aliveness, it is important to allow and encourage the expression of feelings. These could well create a new sense of differentiation and could arrive in a rush or have a cascading effect, which this group experienced in part with the resurfacing of something that was buried and was later worked through and understood more fully.

In conclusion, as facilitators we learnt that attending to the nervous system both on an individual and group level from the onset is critical. Knowing the red flags and building capacity in group members to listen, respond and cultivate the health of their own and the group's nervous system, even when it appears settled and well functioning is central to a healthy and well-functioning group.