

Promoting Change Through a Lens of Personal History

Part 1: In-Group and Out-Group Bias

Joel DiGirolamo

The more I observe human behavior, the more I see how our personal history influences our attitudes and behaviors, providing signposts for future work and direction. In my experience, three of the most powerful elements are in-group/out-group bias, our schemas (models), and our self-motivation or self-efficacy. While these concepts may sound complicated, please bear with me as I go through each element individually. Today I would like to focus on in-group/out-group bias.

If we travel back in time and place ourselves with our ancestors on the savanna, we can feel the safety and strength within our tribe. This group signified safety and protection to us at a fundamental level and provided the security we needed to explore the world around us. Although we no longer live in small tribes on the savanna, our need for the safety and security other people provide is still hardwired into our DNA. This is most likely the reason that Abraham Maslow placed the need for safety and security just above physiological human needs, such as food and water.

Every single action you take in the presence of another individual will be evaluated, consciously or unconsciously, through the lens of in-groups and out-groups. Detection of an out-group cue may trigger a “fight-or-flight” response and prevent further interactions. On the flip side, detection of streams of in-group cues promote and build a relationship and feelings of safety, empathy and support.

Nowadays our “tribe,” or in-group, is much more fluid and loosely defined. Any time we build rapport and establish trust and intimacy, we are developing an in-group. Trusted friends, family and coworkers can all become members of our modern-day tribe, and just as our ancestors relied on the safety and security of their tribe to explore the world around them, we too rely on our in-group to explore the unknown in our lives.

In coaching, building trust and intimacy helps establish an in-group and therefore provides a safe and secure place to explore the unknown with our client. The first time you meet a new client you may search for common ground like a sports team, a hobby or education. The more common areas of interest, the higher the strength of this in-group relationship.

Time and learning can play a role as well. Suppose you have coached an executive for over three years, helping this individual explore and move through several job changes and promotions along the way. Over these years you will have built a very strong bond, a strong feeling of safety and security together, cementing this feeling of the in-group.

Some trainers and coaches enjoy “ropes” courses, where two or more people are necessary for any one person to complete the course. This forces the people to collaborate and work together to meet their goal, developing an in-group relationship in the process.

Most experienced coaches have encountered clients who have become frightened during the coaching process, or perhaps frustrated, to the point that they have bailed out on additional coaching sessions. Assuming for the moment that at one time they felt a part of the in-group with the coach, the point at which they chose to bail was the moment when they flipped from feeling that the coach was in the in-group to feeling the coach was in the out-group. Often the client becomes so skittish that a second chance to build rapport and redevelop an in-group relationship is not possible. Although we can't always prevent these circumstances, understanding in-group/out-group dynamics can go a long way in preventing such an occurrence.

Your personal history can play a key role in this in-group bias. As you have experiences in your life, some of these will feel safe and comfortable while others will feel uncomfortable. The new interactions that are familiar and comfortable will bring with them this in-group feeling. As we look around the globe today, we see what appears to be more fractious polarization than ever before. These are instances of hardening or strengthening the in-group and out-group biases.

Calls to Action

- Where have you observed someone feeling part of an in-group today?
- Where have you observed someone feeling part of an out-group today?
- With your clients, how have you balanced building the in-group relationship with challenging them to explore new avenues of thought or action?

Further Reading

- Bennett, J. L., & Bush, M. W. (2014). *Coaching for change*. New York: Routledge.
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- Sherif, M., Harvey, O. J., White, B. J., Hood, W. R., & Sherif, C. W. (1961). *The Robbers Cave experiment: Intergroup conflict and cooperation*. Norman, OK: Institute of Group Relations, University of Oklahoma, reprinted by Wesleyan University Press, 1988.

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Joel DiGirolamo is the Director of Coaching Science for the International Coach Federation (ICF), where he leads the organization's efforts to develop, curate and disseminate information around the science of coaching. He has more than 30 years of staff and management experience in Fortune 500 companies and is the author of two books, *Leading Team Alpha* and *Yoga in No Time at All*. Joel holds a master's degree in industrial and organizational psychology from Kansas State University, an MBA from Xavier University, and a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from Purdue University. He is a member of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP), the Society of Consulting Psychology (SCP), the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).