

When the Leader Blows his Top

A member of the group volunteers to present a case. She rarely presents as the prospect of being responsible for the case discussion for an hour and a half is simply too much for her. Members reassure her that they too have a responsibility to enter and participate in the case discussion. She is not convinced but proceeds to talk about her case.

The patient and therapist like each other and have a good deal in common. The patient is in her 70's and has a long history of being very helpful to others. The patient has expressed anger about her predicament of feeling unappreciated but continues life along the same vein of being competent and doing good. The discussion revolves around the patient's mother. One of the members offers an interpretation regarding the patient's mother and the supervisee's mother. I become extraordinarily angry regarding this intervention. The supervisee knows better as he is aware of a long-standing rule of keeping the focus on one's inner self rather than what the patient or supervisee is doing. Yet the intensity of my angry response was extraordinarily angry and unusual for me. The group felt I was mean and inappropriate. The supervisee who made the intervention demanded an apology. None was forthcoming from me. "I will look at my insides in my own time!" I said. Later on I reflected upon his relationship with his mother and saw some of the inter-relationships.

Inside of myself I struggle with a sense of embarrassment and humiliation. Why could I not accept this man's particular style rather than trying to control or change it? I reflected on this and wondered if my own mother was behind the emotional genesis of this blowup. This sounded to me like an excuse and I am not about to share it at this time with the group. The supervisee who came under my attack has been in the group for a very long time. I asked myself, should I not demand more of the supervisee and not be wiped out as an authority? I felt like I hadn't existed in the supervisee's mind and the structure of the group had little bearing on his behavior.

I do not know the answers to these questions. There is no good reason I should be hurtful. Yet, I did expose a very human part of myself. I certainly did not play the role of an idealized leader. I still believe that apologies stop the flow of material. Blowups can be seen as part of the process. Or am I trying to justify my behavior? The best I can offer the group is that I felt invalidated as an authority. I simply will have to wait and see what evolves in this group from this last session.

This episode touches upon the broad issues of being a leader. How much does the leader work out his or her countertransference in the group where it takes place? When does this become a distraction for the group from dealing with the problems at hand? How much does the leader emotionally share his or her own process as it becomes part of a total mix and flow of the material? Are apologies helpful or do they get in the way of therapeutic flow? In short, what are the limits and conditions of being human and authentic and when is self-revelation by the leader a further extenuation of his or her own countertransference.

I arrive at some of the answers after a good deal of personal processing. I am aware that the blow up is multi-determined and has many layers of expression. However, I do reach a tentative realization. The blow up was a spillover of some of my own personal struggles and does not belong within the context of group process. My personal sharing then only becomes a boundary violation and a misuse and abuse of the group process. My conflicts are personal and basically not with the case and therefore I owe the supervisee who I blew up an apology. My emotional unloading was truly a dump and had less to do with the clinical material at hand.

In other instances when the leader does express a good deal of emotion, the material can be part of the projection and introjection dialogue. In these instances, my apology could easily be used as a distraction from moving deeper into the material. Some may argue that an apology may clear the air and to some degree that is true. However, it also serves as an interference with the process as it can mask or diffuse the tension that is essential to this kind of exploration. As it turned out the supervisee under discussion did eventually explore some of the deeper material that was very near the surface.

This topic does also bring up the place of sadism in group interaction. Pain and hurtfulness are often partners in the experience of alienation and deep depression. Ideally for some, moving from a self-deprecation to a cleaner expression of hostility can be very helpful. Some, however, may need to blurt out hurtful pain as a beginning stage of making contact with the unconscious. I am aware that this society has a strong appetite for brutality in the sports arena and is no stranger to an ironic form of sado-masochism. So I am left with a paradox, "Can we play with sadism without becoming a participant in meanness." All this will be communicated through the verbal and nonverbal cues of the leader who offers a model of interaction.

As I review this material I am aware that something is missing. When I return to the original blow up I do not remember what I said to the member of the group. I do recall how critical the members were of my behavior. The expression of brutality and sadism needs to find a place in the total fabric of our processing. Is it possible to accept these impulses without shame? Fantasy play that includes meanness does not always imply that we are acting anything out. I believe that if we can normalize these affects, we can free ourselves

in dealing appropriately with their expression. I have found that for many the mere act of fantasy play with brutality and meanness may be an overwhelming task. I am making a plea for us to look at this material otherwise it will chase us until we bleed to death. I also think that sadism and masochism may be transitional steps toward the working through of anger that is so central to depression. Otherwise, there is too much of a gap to jump from pain to anger. Certainly in this example I was expressing, as much as anything else, the pain of dealing with life and the alienation of one's very spirit.