

I Don't Like Sushi Facilitating Egos and Other Things That May Upset Your Indigestion

Ask some people if they like sushi and you will probably get a variety of responses. Some people can't just get enough of it and find it to be healthy. They believe it promotes higher protein levels, lowers cholesterol, helps with depression and even boost the immune system. Others can't tolerate it and question how safe it is to eat. They worry about the dangers of eating raw fish and the increasing chances of acquiring parasites, hepatitis and e-coli.

Eating sushi is a lot like facilitating a group people with strong egos. In some cases, it can be a healthy basis for a meeting, giving you the right nutrients for building the group and the organization. In other cases, you wonder how safe or destructive its raw elements are on everyone involved. Will you get a parasite and become ill? Whether you like sushi or not, it exists, and is it an option for the palate. Whether you like people with strong egos in your meetings or not, it's something you might want to learn how to do. The question becomes, how do you work effectively with people with large egos in a group, so that the situation doesn't become unhealthy?

We often relate the concept of egos to Freud who believed the ego's task was to find a balance between primitive drives, morals, and reality. This theory further believes the ego is concerned with the person's safety and often creates defense mechanisms to make certain the id and superego are cared for.

In the more contemporary world, the ego is the visible part of personality, the part you show the world. You can think of it as a social need related to self-esteem. The ego helps to inflate a person's sense of self-worth and, therefore, for some it's considered a necessity. Ego develops with experience, and explains some of the reasons for differences in behavior. The ego has a deeply ingrained, compulsive need to remain separate and superior at all times, in all places and under all circumstances.

Those whose egos have a huge appetite often find it difficult when the discussion strays from the topic of themselves. Ego grows increasingly hungry whenever the group's attention shifts away from him or her. Therefore, he or she will often provoke conflict to reestablish him or herself as the main subject at hand. Ego is one

the fiercest of all the opponents and the ego will fight to the death when attacked.

Like sushi, egos come in different types and are made of different ingredients. Some might be more appetizing than others. I propose as a facilitator, you may encounter three types of egos in your meetings.

1. Taught Ego- This is a set of feelings, thoughts and behaviors that we all have learned and copied from our families and significant others. An individual has developed these communication styles and behaviors over time and they know which approach is best in what situation (given their frame of reference). The person using this ego type might be strict, judgmental or quick to form opinions because of the beliefs and morals they have learned and have now come to value. Somewhere in their head, they have a manual on how life should run and they are in place to carry the torch for the cause. In short they are like a tape recorder replaying and using what they already know and strongly believe.

Logical Ego- Here the ego deals and responds to the here and now. They take the best from the past and use it appropriately in the present. This ego type sees people as they are, rather than which values and beliefs the person wants to project onto them. The person with this ego type has learned the value of being sensible, logical, detached and calm. They search for factual information on which make decisions and formulate actions. The person using this ego type might listen patiently and gather data to create a rational decision on the data they have collected. In short they are like a human computer, referencing data and experiences to make decisions in the current reality and move forward.

Instinctive Ego- This is a set of feelings, thoughts and behaviors that are more uninhibited, inquisitive, creative and curious. You might experience this person being playful, having tantrums, sulking, becoming impulsive or emotional. The person using this ego type might explore options and in turn makes sure the group is having fun during the process. In short they are like play dough, molding and creating as they go.

Each of these ego types are designed to protect the psyche from harm and make the person feel more comfortable. They're neither right nor wrong, it's simply a matter of taste. For a facilitator the task is to manage these ego types and direct how they might impact the group dynamics.

At a recent meeting, I was facilitating a group of highly controlling, competitive executives. It was a group filled with all the ingredients of ‘Taught’, ‘Logical’ and ‘Instinctive’ egos. One gentleman sat at the far end of U-shaped seating formation. He was a peer to the rest of the people in the room. He was a strongly opinionated traditional person and instantly presented himself as a ‘taught ego’. He was not happy that the group was agreeing to take a specific direction in the strategic plan, which was different from the one he had suggested. We had addressed the issues, (economics, personal impact, personnel impact, etc.) and surfaced all relevant information as determined by the group. Everyone in the group verbally agreed to move forward to the next agenda item. This gentleman’s ego began to defend itself because clearly it was feeling vulnerable. On several occasions he attempted sarcastic humor but to no avail. The group would call him on the ground rules when his behavior was disruptive and then he ‘backed off’ for a bit.

Finally out of frustration (and individual need) he pulled out his laptop and proceeded to type the information being collected from the conversation at the meeting and a side conversation he had started. People were interested in what he was doing and began gathering around him. Some commented on the quality of the information he possessed. It was clear he was hungry for power and control. When I asked if he was willing to share with the whole group what he had captured, he said “Nah, never mind.” closed his laptop, crossed his arms and lifted his feet onto the table so that the soles of his shoes faced the front of the room. His ‘instinctive ego’ was sulking and having a tantrum. Other egos in the room began to respond. Some ‘taught egos’ voiced their dislike for his actions and commented on how they couldn’t believe how a person could behave in such a manner, “It just wasn’t right.”, “Look how he’s wanting it his way.”, “Who made him the Colonel?”. Some of the ‘logical egos’ asked ‘What is really bothering you’ and “Explain why you really thought the idea seems like a better approach.”. Other ‘instinctive egos’ in the room began cracking jokes and asked ‘Have you taken your Prozac?’ or ‘Is it that time of the month?’. Some even offered completely new ideas in hopes of making him happy. It was a regular smorgasbord of egos, a feeding feast for all.

Egos, like sushi, if left unattended in the wrong conditions, can smell and start breeding germs that spread and create an unhealthy situation for everyone. It’s a tough call as a facilitator to determine when is the right time and what is the right process for intervening and helping an ego resolve its own discomfort.

When dealing with egos in a meeting, there are some dynamics to consider before you intervene and facilitate the situation.

1. The relationship you have with the person. Are they a peer, subordinate, client, different or same gender, or do they come from a different cultural than you? When there are differences in people there are corresponding differences in values, beliefs, how we communicate and how we are expected to communicate. Consider making it clear to any individual or group you are working with, what your role is and what you understand their role to be. Presenting this information up front can help you position your intention when you decide to intervene and move more quickly toward a joint resolution.

2. The role the person plays in the group. Some groups have accepted and depend on certain egos that individuals bring to the group. Healthy or not, their ego is a known quantity and something one they can depend on for instigating action. Sometimes people are happy and relieved that another's ego can address a topic they don't want to address. They have come to depend on this ego or tolerate it because the results are to them worth the effort. Consider checking with the group to determine if the behavior is acceptable. Recognize that people are motivated both by fear and need. If you can determine what a person's fears are, or what they need, you are well on your way to understanding and addressing their behavior.

3. The role the person plays in the organization. Some individuals are in higher positions because their ego, behavior, actions, intelligence and political savvy have in the past served them well. They have achieved their current level in the organization and know how to behave in order to stay at this level. They have no interest in changing their behavior. Consider addressing the topic of 'position' at the beginning of the meeting. Have a clear understanding of whether this is a meeting for the purpose of reaching agreement with all the players we are all equals in the room or are people's input being considered in the context of roles / positions present in the room.

4. The mental health of the person. I once had an employee who was released from prison after serving a murder sentence. He was considered mentally ill at the time of the murder due to a chemical imbalance. Now that he was taking his medication, and could function in society. Before our group meetings, I would check in with him and see how his day was going (in essence I want to know if he was mentally well at present). I have clients that I refuse to coach because they are not taking their bipolar meds and if there is a chemical imbalance there is not much you can do until their mental health is treated. (Consider checking with others in the

group to see if this is usual and acceptable behavior for this person.) If the person is not mentally stable, it will be important to not antagonize or challenge the person's sense of reality. For them their behavior makes perfect sense. At this point, you will have to do your best to keep the dialogue flowing smoothly and address the issue off-line.

A person's behavior can make perfect sense to them. After all, their ego is naturally protecting other issues present unconsciously. Egos are part of the dynamics within a group and do need to be managed.

As with eating sushi, the results of the facilitation are affected by your preparation. Setting the tone, purpose, parameters and ground rules before you start a meeting is often key, as a proactive measure in working with egos which surface during a meeting.

As with eating sushi, facilitation is an experience that involves all your senses. The environment you create (the colors, the sounds, the shared laughter, and taste left in people's mouths) all impact the experience. Being open to understanding people's fears and needs and trying to address the real issue causing the behavior will be necessary for dealing with the issue that surface.

As with eating sushi, the facilitation process is a ritual must have and needs to have a strong beginning and close. It requires an opportunity for the group to celebrate its success. Kampai ('cheers' in Japanese) to all those who help a group of strong egos accomplish their goals.

If you are still having issues with working with egos there is always the analogy to using Wasabi (a plant that grows almost exclusively in Asia and is much like horseradish). Wasabi's best properties are killing parasites, inhibiting microbes, preventing or aiding treatment of blood clotting, asthma, and some forms of cancer. But that's another article!

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