

LEADERSHIP AND GROUP MEMBERSHIP
ERIC BERNE'S "COMBAT STATE".

by Tony White
Transactional Analyst

Introduction

"Russians"

Lyrics by Sting (aka Gordon Sumner) (1995)

"In Europe and America,
there's a growing feeling of hysteria
Conditioned to respond to all the threats
In the rhetorical speeches of the Soviets"

"There is no monopoly of common sense
On either side of the political fence
We share the same biology
Regardless of ideology
Believe me when I say to you
I hope the Russians love their children too"

Hope. What's hope got to do with it Gordon, of course they do (love their children). Not only do we share the same biology but we also share the same psychology. I would say, without any fear of contradiction whatsoever, that the mothers and fathers in Russia have exactly the same quantity and quality of love for their children as do the mothers and fathers in New Zealand, Singapore and Australia. To actually question if they do is representative of the 'mind set' that all sides of the political divide get from their respective leaderships.

Race Relations

One of the best lessons I ever received in race relations was when I ran my first TA therapy group in Singapore in the mid 1980s. Before going I thought this is going to be very interesting as I will get to see a variety of psychological and emotional problems that I have not had contact with before as Singapore is a very multicultural society. Well was I in for a disappointment. I rapidly discovered that no matter what culture one has come from everyone has a script, everyone has a mother and a father who they want to feel loved by, who they need to rely on and then separate from, who they will feel angry at, everyone has a brother and/or a

sister who they compete with, play with, feel frustrated by, get along with. We all have to find a mate to couple with and all have the problems that can go along with that. To be sure there were different emphases in the therapy group and some of the solutions found had to be different to comply with the different cultures, but all the problems were basically the same. So if we are all basically the same psychologically how come we can have wars?

A Psychological Basis for War

To have a war you need two large groups of people who can vilify and demonise each other. Without this you are not going to get enough people to be in the army, to support the army and who can justify to themselves and their fellow countrymen the killing and imprisoning of the enemy. This is particularly so for a democracy, but all leaders needs a supporter base of some kind. One of the most obvious examples of this is what Hitler did with vilifying Jews before and during WW2. This would have allowed the German population to feel justified to have an army that could kill and imprison the Jews.

Globalization it could be said will have a negative impact on this demonising and vilifying process. As various ethnic and cultural groups move more and more around the world to live and travel, people will get to know each other more and find out that there is very little difference between, like I did when I went to Singapore.

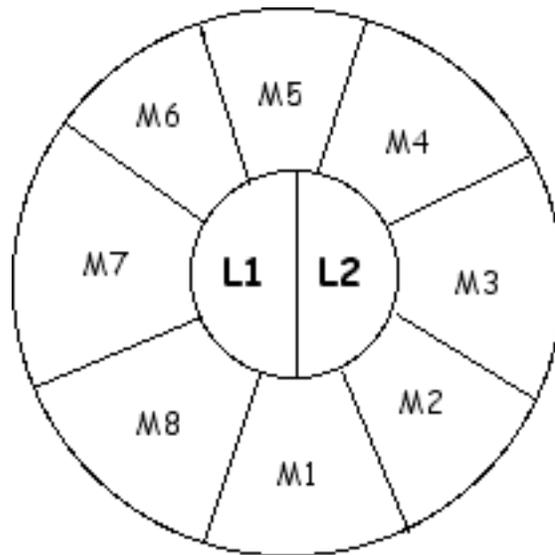
This in my view is why wars of the style of WW2 are less likely to happen now that globalization (people and information moving around the world) and the internet take more of a hold in large numbers of people lives. We quickly discover that we are all the same and 'those others' are not demons who have evil intent, so that we have to get them before they get us.

This will remove a common political strategy of leaders around the world like Berne(1966) says in his book "The Structure and Dynamics of Organisations and Groups." He proposes that a leader can improve his home supporter base by convincing the population that there is an enemy out there. This he suggests is a normal human reaction. People will stop infighting (inside a group) when there is a enemy perceived on the outside. Humans' natural survival instinct is to group together when an enemy is seen outside.

Group Structure Diagram

Democracy divides the leadership into at least 2 parts (L1 & L2) which the membership (M1, M2,...) elect from time to time. (Diagram 1.) This of course has many advantages one being that differing views may be expressed and it makes it harder for the leadership to become corrupted because L1 and L2 are always closely watching each other and can they increase their popularity by showing the

membership that the other side is corrupt.

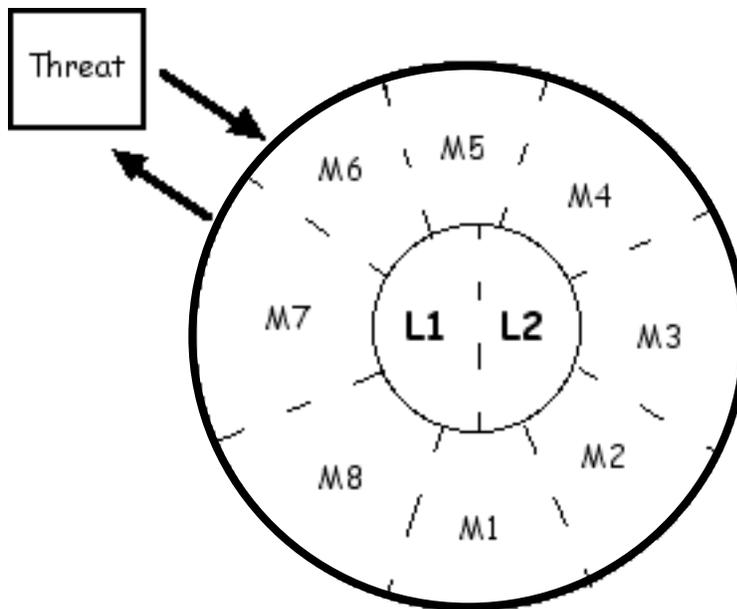


Democracy
Minor internal group structure.
Berne (1966)
Diagram 1.

The downside to having a divided leadership is that they compete against each other and will use all sorts of means to make themselves appear more attractive to the membership than the other side. One means of doing this is by getting the group into what Eric Berne called a 'combat state'.

Berne (1966) states, "Since again the first task of a group is to ensure its own survival, all other work tends to be suspended in the face of an external threat, and the group mobilises its energies to engage in the external group process..."(P26) & "A group in this state maybe called a combat group"(P26). This can be diagrammed below - Diagram 2.

In such a state the boundaries between the members become less pronounced and people co-operate much more than before. Even the most bitter rivalries and jealousies between various members may be forgotten when a group is in a combat state. They have to be because if there is infighting between members then the possibility of the external threat destroying the group increases. If the group is destroyed then there is no infighting for the members to do anyway!



Group in a combat state
Diagram 2.

The leadership also want to survive and the membership also want them to survive and co-ordinate the response to the threat, so the boundaries between the various leaderships reduce and they co-operate more and compete less. Of course the leadership know this and that this is a good way of increasing ones popularity with the members. In a combat state the members are more reluctant to have change (in the leadership or otherwise) as that also reduces the groups ability to counteract the external threat.

The external boundary around the entire group is highlighted in a combat state and the whole group focus on it. Hence we have things like 'Border security' where the group spend time, effort and money making the external boundary increasingly defined. I have left the boundary between the membership and the leadership also defined but to a lesser extent.

The Combat State as a political strategy

This article to some extent is highlighting a conflict of needs between the leadership and the membership. In most battles it is the membership that fight, not the leadership and the membership would not want conflict with an outside group exaggerated just so a leadership can increase its supporter base. I am suggesting that in most cases leaders would not actively go out and create an outside threat but most leaders from all political persuasions would seize on situations where there is some threat and highlight it.

A good example was when the then Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating called Dr Mahathir of Malaysia, "recalcitrant" and Dr Mahathir responded with his usual 'Aussie bashing'. This led to public name calling and this reminds the membership of both countries that there are others out there who do not like us so we just better be prepared. The combat state is reinforced in both countries and the leadership gets more support.

Then there was the 'children overboard affair' in Australia. The Prime Minister John Howard suggested that refugees on a boat had thrown their children overboard into the ocean to get into Australia. The ulterior transaction is: "Look how desperate these people are and they are savages to do such a thing, we better protect ourselves" The Combat state is reinforced. The 'Cold War' and the 'Arms Race' are other prime examples of how the combat state is used as a political strategy to keep the leadership in power at home.

(Please note that I have given examples from both sides of the political divide and I am not supporting or refuting Australian current refugee policy).

This puts the membership and leadership in a state of conflict, and the leaderships of both 'opposing' countries are actually co-operating. Using each other to firm up support at home. Diagram 3.

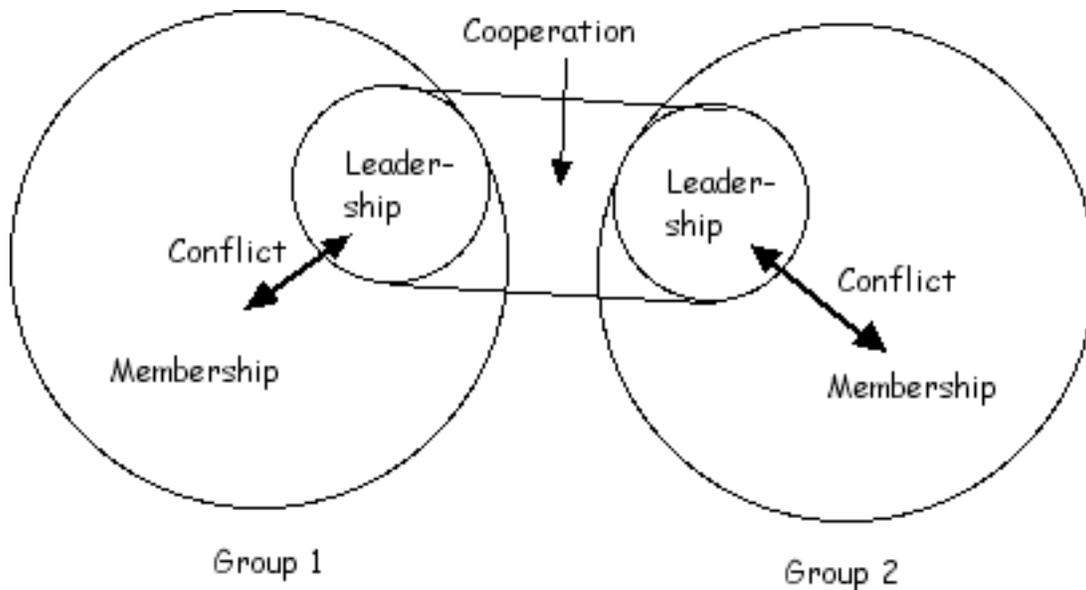


Diagram 3.
The combat state used
for political gain

The membership want the leadership to be honest with them about outside threats and not have situations exaggerated for the leaders own political gain.

Unfortunately this a very grey and murky area where there can be no clear idea of how much outside threat actually exists. All leaderships have to keep intelligence secret from the membership, so the full information on any conflict situation can never be known by the membership. All the membership can do is be alert to how leaderships of opposing groups actually can co-operate by creating outside threats to each other. When this happens the true conflict is not between the groups but between the leaderships and the memberships of each group.

Leadership Scripts

Anyone who gets themselves into a position of significant power could be said to have a script currency of 'power'. Such a person uses power in their relationships as a way of understanding self and others. It is part of their life script and their self image or self esteem. To lose power would in most instances be seen as a retrograde step indeed, by someone who has a script currency of power. As Palmer(1977) states, "A currency is a tangible item required by an individual to ensure a feeling of being loved - script style"(P20).

There certainly are many examples which show the lengths some will go to hang onto power and obtain power. The worst thing for them is to lose it. I would suggest that if one surveyed history and looked at how leaders have changed, that nine times out of ten the threat to the leaders power came from within the group rather than from outside the group. Loss of power by being overthrown from an outside attack is far less frequent than an internal overthrow such as by an election or some form of coup.

This means of course that it is much more important for the leader to be popular at home than to be popular overseas which provides further support for diagram 3. Encouraging a combat state assists ones popularity at home.

The Combat State at Home

Whilst I am using examples at a national level such as in a wartime situation this type of group dynamics occurs at all levels. It can just as well occur with families. If parents for whatever reason do not want the children to leave home then they can create a family that is in a combat state.

The parents can create the belief system: "We are the Frogmortons and we always stick together. We are different/superior to the others in the world. They do not understand us and you can only ever really trust family."

If taken on by the children (membership) then there will be less serious infighting and it makes it more difficult for the children to separate (leave home) as that would weaken the group in the face of an external threat (non-family people).

I was working with a family recently where the combat state was being used by one of the members of the family. There was a mother and father, the eldest son

had left home and was living overseas. The youngest daughter (Alice) who was 15/16 was about to leave home. The parental relationship whilst not violent nor argumentative was 'shaky' because of possible infidelity and basically the 'ravages of time'. It would be safe to say that when the last child left home the longevity of the husband and wife's relationship was at best doubtful. When it was just them left in the house with no children there would be some major working out to do.

What happened and continues to happen at this time is Alice has suddenly become uncontrollable. She runs away from home, uses and sells drugs, lives on the streets, steals stuff and so forth. Both the mother and father are very disturbed by this behaviour and worry about her and what to do. But when dealing with the daughter they function well as a team and there is no way they would separate whilst all this is going on. The daughter has managed to create a significant threat for the parents (her health and livelihood) and this has put them in a combat state and they have closed ranks and function well in the partnership. In essence she is currently keeping her parents marriage together by using the combat state.

It can also be used in organisations. If a manager is dealing with a group of supervisors and they are not well functioning as a team because of infighting, splintering into subgroups', jealousies and so forth what can the manager do?. He could at the next supervisors meeting announce that as of next month they will no longer have access to parking bays at work. That the parking space is now going to be used for something else and they will have to now either find their own paid parking space or catch the bus to work.

If he did such a thing, what would happen? They would close ranks, start talking with each other, working and co-operating together to counter this "unfair action" of losing their parking space. They would begin to work as a team, precisely the goal the manager was wanting to achieve. If one is managing some form of group that is not functioning well as a group then one way to get it to function well is to attack it, or provide it with some form of outside threat. Then it moves into the combat state and functions well as a team. If he can then get this newly co-operating group to focus on the goals of the organisation then everyone wins. The combat state is the best sort of team building one can have by a long shot.

It would also seem safe to say that in team sports the best coaches are the ones who have learnt how to use the combat state in their coaching techniques. Such approaches could be, 'This is the team that can keep us out of the finals', 'Last time this opposition humiliated us on the score board', 'Last time we met this opposition they sent our captain off on a stretcher', 'This opposition has been slagging off at us in the media'. The more threatened a coach can make a team feel about the opposition then the more they will function co-operatively in the field of play.

It seems reasonable to say that every governmental and non-governmental organisation would have used such dynamics at some time. Some may use it often and

will continue to.

To again quote Eric Berne(1966) "...the first task of a group is to ensure its own survival..."(P26). That is a very powerful driving force in social psychology. To all of us own own personal survival is the paramount driving force within us. Humans have to group together in order to survive individually in the long term. That powerful group driving force can thus be used by those who are inclined to do so.

Know Thy neighbour

I am not for a moment suggesting that politicians using the combat state of mind, is the cause of wars. That would be naive in the extreme. The politics of nations or even family units are complex ventures indeed. What I am saying is that human survival is the penultimate driving force in us. Politicians and group leaders know this and will use it at least at times to further their own politician gain. So I am suggesting that the combat state can be a significant factor in leadership politics of any group, from whole countries to individual families.

As I mentioned before one of the best ways the membership can counter this improper use of the combat state by the leader is by getting to know their neighbours. On a world level the use of the combat state as a political ploy will fall on harder times because of globalization and the internet. As people get to know others from different countries with greater ease, then we will find out that we are all psychologically the same and most of us are co-operative and want to help others.

Conclusion

One of my world neighbours that I have got to know through the internet is the current TA Times middle eastern correspondent - Maryam Oskoui, who is Iranian, originally from Tehran. She has kindly agreed to talk to the TA Times readership about a bit of her daily life in Iran. As you read her comments, take away the surface dressing and see how similar the underlying family dynamics are between her life in Tehran and those in western democracies.

We are obviously from very different cultures. Psychologically however there may be little difference between us. Finally to rephrase Sting,

"We share the same biology (and we share the same psychology)". And yes Gordon, the Russians do love their children too!

References

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