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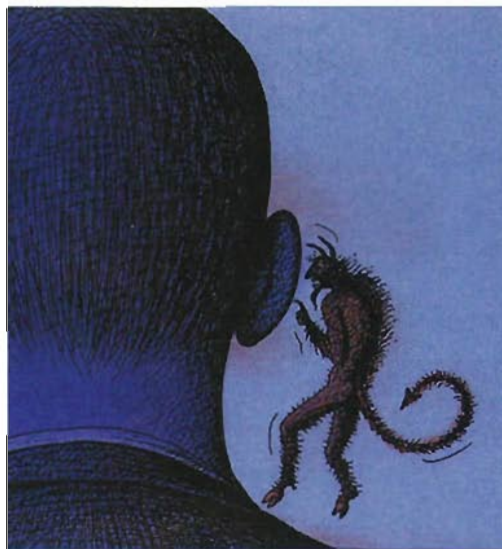
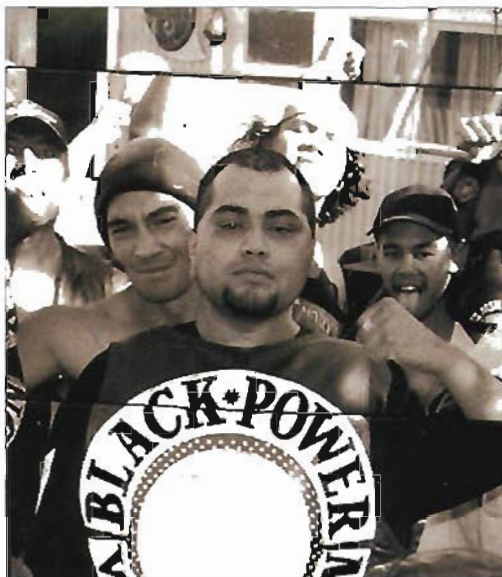
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"Why is it so many leaders get caught up in themselves? They get seduced by the money or fall prey to the pressures out there."



My Gangbuster Meeting

By John Wareham

People were shocked. What unworlly idiot would attempt to run a leadership program for New Zealand's two most demonic enemy gangs?

Black Power and The Mongrel Mob had never previously gotten together without trying to kill each other. Black Power says it exists to advance the welfare of the indigenous Maori. The Mongrel Mob, a less idealistic mixed-race gang, proudly takes its name from a magistrate who declared them "a bunch of mongrels unfit to mix with decent citizens." The warfare between the two gangs has a lot to do with carving up territory for drug sales.

A scary gathering, indeed, yet megalomaniac me hoped to fly in from New York, enclose them within a countryside hotel

conference room for three days, and inculcate some enlightened social consciousness. I'd get them all discussing psychology, philosophy, and leadership. Big ideas would transform them. They would enter as thugs but emerge as citizens. Or so I imagined.

Cynics said they'd fail to show up—or, if they did, would merely wave their middle digits and leave. Others foresaw a bloodbath. Well-meaning friends said that since I was doing this as an unpaid volunteer, I must harbor a death wish.

I confess to sharing that latter concern as thirty tattooed, leather-jacketed gang leaders swaggered into a dimly lit conference room at dusk. Hoping to inject a little diversity, I'd also invited a nun, a handful of supposedly regular citizens as

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Achieving consensus when consensus seems impossible.



observers, and my wife, Margaret, who thrives on danger.

By way of welcome, a daunting dozen performed a blood-curdling Maori war chant. Then the two enemy gangs gathered on opposite sides of a semicircle. The hostility was palpable as they leaned back in their steel chairs, eyeing each other with uneasy disdain—and then me with unvarnished skepticism. But worse was to come.

One of their conditions for showing up was that no police be present. So, effectively, the only security system was me.

With my safety on the line, why would I agree to create and run such a program? I did so because I believe that miracles can happen when people get together. Even among enemies, a meeting can confer a special sense of identity and kinship. Participants share and replenish a fund of knowledge, experience, judgment, and legend—a “social mind.” Tapping that intelligence increases their power.

The Opening Blunder

A meeting may have several goals, among them informing, brainstorming, solving problems, and making decisions. Common to all, however, one way or another, is the need to *persuade*.

Unfortunately, believing that persuasion is a matter of force, facts, and logic, too many high-testosterone “alpha” leaders mistakenly state their positions upfront and then attempt to browbeat everyone into subjection. In many settings, nobody dares to disagree, and the Alphas prematurely congratulate themselves for inspiring a motivated team. After the meeting, however, resentment and passive resistance set in. Nothing gets done, and the frustrated Alpha impotently fumes.

Here’s what Alpha leaders need to know: *Persuasion is a process, not an event.* A one-shot hard sell might move encyclopedias, but that’s about it. The process becomes particularly challenging when you have to persuade people to accept what they may ini-

tially resist or even reject. Bear in mind Oscar Wilde's remark that "an idea that is not dangerous is unworthy of being called an idea at all." So the very best ideas are inevitably threatening. Getting people to accept them takes subtlety and skill—and begins with the agenda itself.

Where to Hide the Hidden Agenda

Some people say there shouldn't be a hidden agenda. In fact, it's OK to have a hidden agenda *so long as you hide it in plain sight*.

The agenda is a crucial piece of paper that does infinitely more than merely outline discussion topics—it channels them in the direction you want. You're the leader, right? So simply present the items to be discussed in the order that will propel the discussion toward the outcome you want.

Topics vary in importance and urgency, but each generally addresses three questions: What's the problem? Why is it happening? How can we fix it? Some topics unite; some divide. Open with the unifying items. Then get the trivial but urgent stuff out of the way, taking care not to dwell upon it. If there's a particularly vital item, set a "time-certain." When that time rolls around, drop everything and open that discussion. A long agenda can make for a brief meeting.

Indicate the reason for each topic to be discussed. Better, for example, to amplify "Pricing Structure" to read "Pricing Structure: to consider a new two-tier pricing structure for best customers." If possible, circulate brief—the briefer the better—background papers.

Attention flags after ninety minutes. If you need to go longer, break up the meeting with coffee or lunch.

The agenda for my gang-leader conference is a bound set of background readings. It begins with the potentially unifying idea that we are all brothers under the skin. It moves to the personal issues—such as emotional damage—that impel intelligent, well-meaning people to join gangs. The final readings address the divisive question of why an overall social structure subtly denies the rights of indigenous natives.

Most people arrive self-certain and loath to lose their mind-set. That's why the key to changing minds is to introduce conflicting ideas and create "constructive confusion." Only after confusion has been attained can clarity appear.

Some of the background readings are simple; most are profound; some, though literate and plausible, are nonsense. The most powerful message lies concealed in the timing of the seemingly unrelated discussions. If I have it right, we will be guided to the light and all wind up blood brothers. If I have it wrong, it could all become a bloody mess.

Set Up for Success

The setup can also determine the outcome. Crush everyone into a small space rather than address a half-empty room. And remove extra chairs to preempt the "come early and get a seat near the back" syndrome. If you want to get a real discussion going, sit around a boardroom table or arrange the chairs in a semicircle. But exercise control over where people sit. Sitting opposite one's enemy facilitates conflict; sitting alongside makes disagreement more difficult. Proximity to the chairman

is a sign of honor, so think about how you might reward a friend or disarm an opponent.

The room is somewhat larger than ideal, so I've set my hopefully soothing semicircle off to the side, along a windowed wall. The two gangs gravitate to opposite sides of the semicircle, so as an opening gambit I ask two of the top leaders to mix them up. After some dragging of feet, they do. The atmosphere seems suddenly less daunting, and I heave a sigh of relief. But alas, too quickly.

How to Seize and Hold Control

Alpha executives need to realize that the best way to get what they want is to surrender control or, at least, seem to. The true source of power is not the barked order but the perceived commitment to a combined objective—and skill in leading the discussion to that point.

In fact, the best meetings have two leaders, *advocates* and *synthesists*. Advocates openly press for a particular point of view. Synthesists explore all points of view and keep the discussion calm, logical, and moving forward. Only schizophrenics can hope to play both roles simultaneously. So if you're one of those Alphas who feels compelled to fight openly for your views, let someone else run the meeting. The best way to get the outcome you want, however, is to become a synthesist. Anoint an advocate within the crowd to make your arguments, and press the discussion in the direction you want it to go. Or you can, perhaps, introduce a highly credentialed expert upfront, give him the floor to make your very best case, then include him in the discussion as a staunch defender of your secret position.

My gang-leader agenda calls for me to be introduced by Joseph Roberts, a reconstructed formerly violent felon and a graduate of my New York prison program. Joe went on to help me establish the non-profit Eagles Foundation, which develops leaders from within the prison population. Joe and I have both flown in from New York. My assumption is that as a tall, handsome African-American still bearing a few of the facial scars from his earlier life, Joe will immediately forge a special emotional connection. As the dusk begins to settle outside that country hotel room, Joe stands to his full, imposing height, takes a deep breath, gazes over the tattooed, arms-clenched audience, and waits for silence. "As Malcolm X said," he intones in a reproving yet uplifting voice, "You should want for your brother—what—you—want—for—yourself."

Appointing another person to promote your point of view might seem Machiavellian. In fact, you're merely having someone toss your ideas into the arena for open examination. In your role as synthesist, you'll ensure that the meeting explores all the contrary arguments. Better ideas than yours may surface. As a savvy leader, you'll incorporate those notions into the discussion—then lead everyone, yourself included, to the best result. Oh, happy day! But before we move on, let's consider the supreme synthesist of all time.

Socrates wandered the streets of Greece four centuries before Christ. He never wrote a word yet changed the world by introducing logic and reason. He professed to know nothing and confined himself to asking questions. His piercing queries

created enemies and irked authorities, and he was charged with leading the youth of the day astray. Given the choice of recanting his teaching or being put to death, he chose death.

Socratic questioning is the synthesist's secret weapon. It works in boardrooms, locker rooms, and prison cells, with the high and mighty, the men and women in the street, and the denizens of darkness.

Leading people to authentic understanding, using the full power of Socratic questioning, takes knowledge, intellect, and skill. It is easier to pontificate but not as effective. That's because, as the gods well know, we mere mortals pay attention to only the things that we discover for ourselves. The Socratic synthesist's secret weapon is to involve everyone with open-ended questions that bring focus to the key issue, examine underlying assumptions, monitor the logic, introduce alternative perspectives, probe implications and consequences, create constructive confusion, and extract ultimate clarity.

Joe's introduction works well. As I rise to my feet, the gang leaders pay respectful attention. "A life may turn on a moment," I tell them. Then I hoist the book of background readings. "So what do we make of this opening quote from Dante?" As they open their books, I read the quote aloud:

*"In the middle of the journey of our life/
I came to myself within a dark wood/where
the straight way was lost."*

"Who's Dante?" says Kori, a Black Power warrior with a full facial tattoo and jade earring.

"Why do you ask?"

"Dunno."

Long pause.

"Doesn't matter who he was," says Coker, a Mongrel Mobber with a gold tooth, "just that he was lost."

"How come?"

"He'd gotten into the forest and couldn't get out."

"What kind of forest?"

"Hey, chief, there's a lot of forests in this neck of the woods." The laughter is scattered.

"Coker's right. There are many forests. But what kind of forest was Dante talking about?"

Coker breaks the silence: "The forest of the mind?"

"What kind of forest might that be?"

How to Cast Spells

"Why do you always answer a question with a question?"

"Why should I not?"

A successful Socratic discussion begins with a list of questions and prior questions. What's a prior question? A question presupposed by another question.

Assume someone asks, "Why do we tolerate white-collar

crime?" The Socratic synthesist will immediately want to settle the prior question: "What is crime?" Here comes the response: "A crime is what happens when someone breaks the law." And now the synthesist's follow-up question: "Does that apply to all laws?"

The first four steps to becoming a Socratic synthesist:

- Write down the main discussion question.
- Figure out a list of prior questions.
- Do that again for each prior question.
- Stay focused on the first question on the list as well as on the last.

If you get this right, you'll create a list of questions that probe the logic of the first question. *These* are the questions that will underpin the upcoming discussion.

The Socratic practitioner is effectively a model of critical thinking, one who asks deep, piercing questions and creates a stimulating environment in which everyone is comfortable



A credible voice: Joseph Roberts of the Eagles Foundation.

answering honestly and fully in front of their peers—or even bitter enemies. Speaking of which . . .

I hear but ignore a swish of doors off to my right. Two dozen more members of the Mongrel Mob have belatedly decided to make their presence felt. I sneak a peek in their direction. Save for one, they are tall, intimidating, and Maori. Atop their blood-red T-shirts, they're wearing armless black leather jackets emblazoned with the face of a ferocious bulldog. Half of them are showing traditional Maori facial tattoos; most of the others bear the bulldog image on their cheeks. Three are wearing Nazi helmets. One sports a swastika on his forehead. Several are dragging heavy chains. It's jet black outside, but many are wearing sunglasses. Catching my eye, one fellow removes his silvery shades. Or did he really? It's hard to say—some clever en-

graver has tattooed raccoon-like circles around his eyes. Now, fully in the room, the gang is motionless but defiant, arms akimbo. I pretend not to notice and wind down the current discussion. Then I turn to face them. Three thoughts rush to mind: First, this is a higher level of depravity than I'd anticipated; second, I'm in way, way over my head; and third, since the latecomers have the exits blocked, how will we "civilians" ever get out of here alive? The wide and darting eyes within the semicircle tell me that everyone is thinking the same thing.

One perverse way to disrupt a meeting is to engage in silent hostility. In such cases, it can be helpful to reflect upon the insight of psychologist Alfred Adler, who noted that people are mostly the opposite of the image they take the greatest trouble to project. That's why, behind the mask, clowns can be heart-sick and ogres so often turn out to be marshmallows.

My stomach is churning, but with luck the Mongrel Mobbers won't notice. "Gentlemen," I say, with a big smile in the direction of the giant who seems to be the leader, "I don't think you and I have been introduced." I stroll to their apparent chief and offer my hand. "I'm John, your discussion leader." He remains mute, so I grab his hand and pump it. He's still reluctant, but nothing bad has happened, so—to the horror of those in the semicircle—I genially bump his chest with my shoulder. "Didn't quite catch your name," I say. Long pause. "Podge," he finally mumbles. "Hey, Podge! So glad you could join us. Now let me just say hello to your friends." I force every last one of them to shake hands with me, committing each name to memory as I go. Joe has rustled up extra chairs. We form them in a second semicircle behind the first, and the discussion proceeds.

People judge a meeting by whether they were able to speak their views and others truly listened. As synthesist, your job is to involve everybody. And, of course, to restrain anyone who thwarts or attempts to dominate the progress of the discussion. Here are ten rules to help you on your way:

1. Establish some ground rules: one person speaking at a time, everyone paying attention, and no talking over anyone.
2. In getting the conversation going, it is usually wise to choose the soldiers first and the generals last. (Taking the generals first—or too quickly—will likely inhibit the soldiers.) Make your questions clear and specific. Then be prepared to wait silently for ten seconds—or more—to gather a response.

"We're discussing the problem of people getting lost in the woods. I guess that's why you guys were late, right?" Several of them break into sheepish smiles. "We're talking about how people get lost in the forests of the mind and spirit because they got harmed as kids. Did that happen to any of you guys?" Long, long silence. Intuition tells me to break my rule and confront one of the generals. "Did it ever happen to you, Podge?" The startled eyes of the group are telling me to stay away from Podge. I hold his gaze. "Yeah," he finally says. "You want to tell us what happened, Podge?" He twists in his chair. "I got kicked up the ass by my dad," he says. "It happened when I was a kid. But I deserved it. And I got over it." The atmosphere is charged. Kori, from the rival gang, breaks the silence. "I got kicked, too," he says. The confession becomes a chorus.

3. Respond to every answer with a further question. How did you come to believe that? Do you have evidence? What

are the implications? How might someone object?

"Did any of you truly ever get over getting kicked?" I ask. Podge steps into the silence. "You never do," he says, softly.

4. It is impossible to lead a Socratic discussion by rote, so think along with everyone else as you lead the discussion.

5. Provoke discussion with open-ended questions, and encourage the clash of ideas—but never the clash of personalities.

6. Seek to understand the ultimate foundations for what participants say or believe. Treat all assertions as connecting points to further thoughts, and treat all thoughts as needing development. Recognize that a thought can exist fully only in a network of connected thoughts—and use your questions to pursue those connections.

7. Listen to each comment carefully and seriously. Don't react until you have the meaning clear and understand the perspective it is coming from. Never rush. Give everyone time to think. Say, "Let's take a moment to think that through."

8. It can take courage to offer a suggestion, and, as I said, the best ideas can seem dangerous or impractical, so welcome all suggestions. Be alert for cynics who reflexively dismiss ideas. Ask the naysayer to produce a better suggestion.

9. Ask participants to summarize what's been said. Periodically recap what's been discussed, and what still needs to be.

10. Finally, when the discussion has played out and a consensus has been established, congratulate all present on their intellect and attention, and refine that accord into an acceptable resolution and a list of actions to be taken—noting specifically who will be responsible for each. In so doing, you transition from synthesist to advocate, with no one noticing the switch.

The Socratic synthesist is to the participant what the voice of critical thinking is to the individual mind. It is a voice that focuses on thinking and questions it. In discussion, it is a public voice. In everyday thinking, it is an inner, private voice. Eventually, the savvy synthesist wants his colleagues to internalize this public voice, so that they routinely question their own thoughts, bringing probing questions into the functioning of their own minds. Now they routinely think about their thinking.

We began the conference with thirty ambivalent gang leaders. Word soon got around town that something special was happening. On the final day, more than a hundred packed the hall. At the closeout, the gangs formed two concentric circles. In the ancient tradition of the Maori, those two circles seemed to spin as each and every gang leader shook hands, embraced, rubbed noses as spiritual brothers, then moved forward to do the same with yet another formerly deadly enemy.

After the meeting

That night, we were the lead item on every TV station. Nothing like this had happened in New Zealand's history. The next day, *The New Zealand Herald* proclaimed the outcome "a miracle." Maybe so, but the magic mostly lay in the art of getting the right people together, putting a carefully constructed agenda into play, and taking a back seat—or seeming to—while unleashing the right questions. ☪