



STANDING IN THE FIRE

Leading high-heat meetings
with clarity, calm, and courage

LARRY DRESSLER

Foreword by Roger Schwarz

An Excerpt From

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Leading High-Heat Meetings with Clarity, Calm, and Courage***

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PREFACE

WE WHO DESIGN AND FACILITATE meetings for a living tend to see our work in two dimensions: (1) the *what*—the content of the gatherings we facilitate, which includes the purpose, questions, challenges, and possibilities that matter most to the people in the groups we serve; and (2) the *how*—the structures, methods, skills, and techniques we use to help a group mobilize its collective energy, insights, and commitment to action. It's in this second dimension that our special expertise really comes into play. Our ability to assist groups with the *how* of complex, emotional, important conversations is what makes us uniquely helpful in the world of high-stakes meetings.

Whether we admit it or not, the conventional wisdom of many people who do this kind of work is *If I can only learn a few more methods, I'll be able to handle any group situation!* And so we keep investing time and money

in books, workshops, and conferences that focus exclusively on *how*. We collect tools and methods as if they were marbles. And even with a full bag of techniques, we are surprised when the messiness of a meeting pulls us into feeling anxious, defensive, and unable to think clearly or to draw effectively on our accumulated knowledge and skills.

Experienced facilitators, consultants, community activists, and organizational leaders often find themselves “standing in the fire”—working in situations where group members are polarized, angry, fearful, and confused. In these difficult meetings it’s rarely enough to have a solid understanding of what is being said or how to use group intervention methods. In these high-heat situations, the truly masterful change agents draw on something else—something that most leaders have invested little time and effort to cultivate. That something is *who* we are being while we are working with the group. Beyond our vast inventory of theories and techniques is something I’ve come to believe is the difference between competence and true mastery. It is the convener’s *way of being*—an attitudinal, emotional, physical, and even spiritual presence. It is a specific kind of presence that others experience as fully engaged, open, authentic, relaxed, and grounded in purpose.

This book does not contain a single tip or technique on what to do to others during a high-heat meeting. It offers no framework or intervention for getting a group or individual group members from point A to point B. This book offers instead a set of internal, self-directed principles and practices that enable you to be a non-anxious, grounded presence in situations where others are feeling hopeless, agitated, angry, or confused.

The premise of *Standing in the Fire* is that what (knowledge) and how (methods, techniques, interventions) are only as effective as who is delivering them. If who we are in any given moment is anxious or

defensive, our attempts to be in service to the group will at best fall flat and, at worse, amplify the group's distress.

“Who we are” doesn't refer to charisma or enthusiasm. It doesn't mean we are numb to the emotion swirling around the room. It means we show up with integrity and choose the kind of presence we need to embody from one moment to the next.

This book is about pursuing the possibility that each of us can exponentially increase the power of our methods and the wisdom of our choices when we have greater self-awareness about who we are being as we face the heat of group fire.

What Influences Have Shaped My Thinking?

Since my elementary school days in Southern California, when I tried to make my way safely through school hallways dominated by bullies and gang members, I've been holding different versions of the same question: *What are the human qualities that enable one to bring peace, clarity, and hopefulness into a situation that is filled with conflict, uncertainty, and despair?* For most of my adult life I've made my livelihood as an organizational development consultant and process facilitator, which has been in large part a vehicle for me to explore this question on both an academic and a personal level.

If I bring a bias to my work and to the writing of this book, it is a belief that no single school of thought or discipline has a monopoly on useful wisdom. The insights and practices offered here are drawn from conventional and unconventional sources alike, including psychology, complexity theory, neurobiology, Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, the performing arts, and nature. Any idea or practice in these pages is here because of one reason—it offers a useful stepping-stone toward making a positive, even transformational, contribution in the midst of challenging human interactions.

Who Should Read This Book?

Since the earliest human societies, leadership has involved the act of convening—bringing diverse individuals together to pursue a common purpose. Whether you think of yourself as a process facilitator, executive leader, organizational development consultant, mediator, clergy member, educator, community organizer, or change agent, your job involves skillfully convening others in a way that helps them discover and mobilize their shared wisdom and energy. If the word *convening* describes a significant part of your work, this book was written for you. Your capacity to bring into the room a clear, calm, compassionate presence is essential to your effectiveness as a convener, regardless of your specific role or title.

What's Ahead?

Imagine basking in the personal insights and stories of forty of the most experienced conveners you know—a group of people who live on five continents and whose accumulated experience totals over nine hundred years! During the research for this book, my colleague Erica Peng and I had the pleasure of interviewing a remarkable mix of leaders, conveners, change agents, and facilitators—people who know group fire intimately. They work with groups that are tackling some of the most difficult challenges around the world: global hunger, AIDS, the environmental crisis, peace, and postwar reconciliation. The names of these esteemed teachers and friends, many of whom will be recognizable to you as thought leaders in their own right, appear in the acknowledgments. You will see their wisdom throughout these pages.

PART I: THE FIRE

This book is organized into three parts. Part I describes the nature of group fire and what it takes to be a change agent who works in high-heat

situations. The introduction highlights the key propositions and insights of the book, providing an overview of what follows. Chapter 1, “Fire for Better or Worse,” explores the creative and destructive potential of emotional intensity and discord in groups. It describes various facets of group fire as well as how and why change agents often get swept away in their own self-inflicted fires. Chapter 2, “We Are Fire Tenders,” describes how people who convene meetings can use the fullness of their presence to help the group hold a clear and intentional space for strong emotions, conflict, and complexity as its members work to discover new insights and common ground.

PART II: SIX WAYS OF STANDING

The second section of the book describes the mental, emotional, and physical ways of being that enable us to be effective fire tenders. Chapter 3, “Stand with Self-Awareness,” describes how we can become skilled observers of our own thoughts and emotions in order to minimize defensive reactions and make more deliberate choices in high-heat situations. Chapter 4, “Stand in the Here and Now,” offers a set of capacities that enable us to stay in the present moment instead of getting caught up in regrets about the past or predictions about the future. In chapter 5, “Stand with an Open Mind,” we examine the ways in which we can stay grounded in curiosity and inquiry, even in the face of our own impulsive judgments about what is happening in a meeting. Chapter 6, “Know What You Stand For,” is about learning to ground ourselves in our purpose, core principles, and clear commitment to be of service to the group with which we are working. Chapter 7, “Dance with Surprises,” explores the capacities we must cultivate in ourselves in order to overcome our need for certainty and control. These capacities enable us to move creatively and flexibly as unexpected events unfold in our meetings. Chapter 8, “Stand with Compassion,” describes

the ways in which we can lose our empathy for group members when we are in a reactive mode. The capacities described in this chapter enable us to extend a more open heart and greater dignity toward ourselves and others.

PART III: PRACTICES

The third section of the book offers a wide variety of personal practices to help us cultivate the inner capacities described in part II. Chapter 9, “Cultivate Everyday Readiness,” offers practices that facilitators and change agents can use on an ongoing basis to develop greater awareness and to make more deliberate choices in the fire. In Chapter 10, “Prepare to Lead,” we examine what facilitators can do before a meeting. These practices help to connect us with the physical space, our inner state, our intention, the meeting participants. Chapter 11, “Face the Fire,” offers a set of practices that can be used during a meeting to shift ourselves into a more intentional state after we notice an emotional hot button has been pushed. Chapter 12, “Reflect and Renew,” contains practices that we can use after our meeting has concluded. These practices are aimed at fostering continuous learning as well as physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual regeneration.

Each chapter concludes with a set of Questions for Reflection, and chapters 1 through 8 offer an exercise called Try This. These exploratory questions and self-guided exercises are designed to move your learning beyond intellectual understanding and toward practical, everyday application.

Conveners of high-stakes gatherings think a lot about the exterior landscapes of meetings. We have developed ways to structure group processes. We have created techniques for helpfully intervening. We sometimes operate as if what happens in the room is all there is. But as Parker Palmer wrote, “We are constantly engaged in a seamless

exchange between whatever is ‘out there’ and whatever is ‘in here’ co-creating reality for better or for worse.”¹ This book deals with the next frontier of facilitator learning—developing what’s “in here” so that we can partner well with what’s “out there.” The goal of this inner journey is to ensure that whoever shows up as convener, leader, and co-creator of high-heat conversations brings the fullness of his or her personal resources into the infinitely creative and often challenging circle of human interaction.

I hope that *Standing in the Fire* becomes one of those books in your life whose pages you dog-ear and fill with marginal notes. Use this book as a way to affirm your natural gifts and to explore the personal capacities you aspire to develop. As you read, take the time to reflect a bit on what these lessons might mean for you, and the mark you want to make as a leader. And know that even as I write these words, I am on this learning journey with you. The most liberating aspect about this book is that it contains not one tip about how to change anyone else. This is a book for and about you.

INTRODUCTION

THE POWER OF FIRE

CAN YOU REMEMBER THE MOST intense high-heat moment you've faced working with a group? One of my most memorable moments happened fairly early in my career, but I remember it vividly. Catherine, my consulting partner at the time, and I were working with a group of federal law enforcement officers. A conflict between two divisions of the agency had escalated over several months, and just prior to our first meeting, a few employees were caught vandalizing the vehicles of their co-workers by scratching the car doors with keys. People could hardly remember the origin of the conflict, but both factions believed they were in the right. The rift had taken on a life of its own and was now being played out in a cycle of revenge and retaliation.

At the first meeting everyone arrived on time, and as the officers sat down and positioned their chairs, the seating configuration started to look more and more like two circles. The geography of the conflict was clear

from the outset, and the tension in the room was palpable. As they waited for the meeting to begin, people sat with crossed arms and legs, hardly able to look at members of the other group. Just as we were about to begin, Catherine and I noticed that everyone was wearing a gun.

All I could think about in that moment was the twenty or so guns strapped to people who were really angry at each other. My heart was beating fast, and my face felt flushed. I remember looking toward the exit for reassurance. In that moment, I had no idea what to do or say, and Catherine looked only slightly more composed.

What Gets Ignited

It doesn't take firearms to remind us of our vulnerability when we step into the room as the convener of a high-stakes meeting. Sometimes it takes only a skeptically raised eyebrow from a powerful person in the room; other times, a realization that the group will run out of time before achieving its goal. What creates heat for each of us depends largely on our personal hot buttons.

When these buttons are pushed, two kinds of energy can be ignited. One kind of energy connects to an age-old human survival instinct, the *self-protective reaction*. It's habitual, often emotionally charged, and designed to bring us back to our comfort zone. The second kind of energy can be accessed only if we can ask ourselves, *Who do I want to be right now?* This question ignites the energy of *deliberate choice and wise action*. This book is about building our capacity to ignite the second energy, even when our fears and ego encourage us to do otherwise.

What Is the Who?

Staring into the heat of a challenging group dynamic, we instinctively want to do something. We attempt to find just the right intervention

that will make things easier for the group or perhaps for us. With little awareness of our internal dialogue or our emotional state, we take action. And too often that action turns out to be either the wrong choice or a reasonable choice poorly executed. Too often, no action was needed at all. What was needed was a facilitative leader who could serve as a steady, impartial, purposeful presence in the room, holding the space of the conversation with good humor, resoluteness, and compassion.

Who we are in these moments of fire is in itself a powerful intervention. We do not need to be the picture of charisma or Zen-like detachment. Instead we need to stand in a way that has integrity for us and is in service to the group we are there to assist. Our power comes from the realization that we always have a choice about which *who* shows up.

IN SEARCH OF HOT SPOTS

Without passion, conviction, and yearning, there would be no human fire. And without fire, groups would produce very little of interest or positive impact. We need fire to progress, but we also need to help people channel its heat. That's the job of *fire tenders*—people who know how to bring out the life-generating, creative potential of group fire.

Cultivating the creative potential of fire is the only useful approach, because fire suppression doesn't work. Too many leaders and institutions avoid or stifle the critical conversations that need to happen, and the results are often disastrous. Many case studies have been written about Enron and its predominant culture, in which challenging the status quo or raising concerns was simply not acceptable. Dissent was discouraged in a wide variety of subtle and not-so-subtle ways. The policy of suppression ultimately led to the demise of the company. In order to create organizations and communities in which people feel safe speaking their truth, we need leaders who are both skillful at process and who possess the capacity to remain self-aware, open, and fluid even as others struggle with dissent, confusion, and fear.

Fire tenders are drawn to the hot spots of social existence because they know that where there is heat, there is the possibility of transformation. Though they seek out and cultivate heat with great skill, they know their most important tool is their interior self—their mindset, emotional state, and the way they occupy their bodies. They understand that no matter what is producing heat “out there” in the group, they control their own thermostat.

Standing in Service to the Group

Standing is a word with many meanings. When we say, “My decision stands,” the decision remains valid or effective. When we say, “I can’t stand it,” we mean endure or tolerate. When we “stand up,” we are rising to our feet or picking ourselves up. When we communicate “our stand” on an issue, the word refers to an attitude or outlook. “Standing in the fire” encompasses all those meanings. As leaders, we must remain effective in our facilitative roles. Often we need to endure situations we experience as uncomfortable. Inevitably we are knocked off balance by the intense energy of others and must pick ourselves up quickly and regain our equilibrium. When we stand as fire tenders, we are choosing a particular set of attitudes—a way of seeing what is happening and who we are in the moment.

This book explores six interrelated ways of standing in the fire. You will learn what it is like to stand with self-awareness, presence, receptivity, intention, fluidity, and compassion. For each of these ways of standing in the fire, this book describes the capacities you need to succeed.

A Lifetime of Practice

Masterful fire tenders have a set of personal practices aimed at cultivating self-awareness and effective action. These practices help us choose

our way of standing when we face the fire. Every moment, whether inside or outside a meeting, is an opportunity to practice. We can develop ongoing practices that aid us in developing everyday readiness. We can engage in special practices for our arrival at meetings, and we can use practices that help us recover during a meeting when a hot button gets pushed. We need practices that help us to reflect and to renew ourselves after we have come through a human firestorm. Contrary to the popular saying, practice does not “make perfect.” Instead, practice is where we can break through the illusions of perfectionism and control as we learn to become present to our own wisdom during moments in which others find it difficult to access theirs.

Inviting Fire

As we engage in practice and derive new insights from our experiences in groups, we come to realize that destructive fires like distraction, fear, and aggression are all self-inflicted. As we develop greater mastery, we learn to recognize dissent and confusion as old, familiar friends. We welcome inconvenient surprises as useful fuel, and we come to view group breakdowns as the natural precursor to breakthroughs.

The more we work with fire, the more we see it as a source of transformation not only for groups, but also for us as agents of change. Each time we invite dissent, possibility, suffering, passion, or confusion into the room, we must also invite that which is calm, clear, and courageous within us—our wisest, most centered self. Each time we accept this invitation, we honor a proposition as old as humankind’s relationship with fire—that conversation and human connection will change this world for the better.



THE FIRE

The language of fire and heat has long been part of our way of describing social interaction. For example, we say, *The sparks were really flying! The exchange got quite heated. She made an inflammatory comment. He burnt his bridges when he left. She was in the hot seat.* When we bring people together to talk about what matters to them, fire is a given. Where there is passion, conviction, and diversity, you can bet there will be heat.

This section of the book describes the destructive and creative potential of group fire, the many forms that fire takes in social interactions, and the ways in which a facilitator or convener can get swept away in the heat of the moment. We will also explore who we need to be in order to help groups use their emotional energy productively to come through the inevitable periods of conflict, confusion, and despair.

It seems that meetings are becoming more and more combustible—emotionally intense, polarized, or complicated. In my experience, emotional intensity is more likely to occur under the following conditions:

- The outcome of the process is highly uncertain.

- The issue is complex and not fully understood.
- The group has a history of suffering and loss.
- Discussion of the issue has been suppressed in the past.
- Expression of emotion about the issue has also been suppressed.
- The stakes are high.
- Big power differentials exist among those who have a stake.
- The people involved are highly diverse (in personality, culture, etc.).
- People have strong positions and resist seeing alternative points of view.
- The group is physically, mentally, or emotionally fatigued.
- People have hidden agendas and use manipulative tactics.

If you look at this list and think, “More and more of my meetings are held under these conditions,” take that as confirmation that you are working in a highly combustible human landscape. It’s imperative that you understand this landscape and your role in it.



1

FIRE FOR BETTER OR WORSE

It was a familiar feeling—tightness in my chest and the back of my neck. This told me it was time to breathe, trust, let go of attachment to outcome, listen deeply to what was going on, and test things that might or might not go well.

—Gibran Rivera

*Senior Associate,
Interaction Institute for Social Change*

GROUP FIRE IS THE STATE IN WHICH a situation feels uncomfortable, emotionally heated, intense, and perhaps quite personal. Fire is as pervasive in human interactions as it is in nature—and just as necessary. In this chapter we will learn to recognize different forms of group fire, appreciating both the productive or destructive qualities of high-heat meetings. We'll also examine the ways in which our habits of thinking, emotional hot buttons,

and egos make us vulnerable to unwise thoughts and actions when we are standing in the heat of human interaction.

We see fire in the halls of government and in the hallways of our elementary schools. It shows up when the leaders of our churches, synagogues, and mosques gather. We feel the fire at town council meetings and industry conferences. When historic adversaries, diverse ethnic groups, and world leaders come together, we expect and usually get fire. When industry leaders, elected officials, scholars, social activists, and citizens come together to deliberate pressing issues like hunger, climate change, and national security, we witness the fire.

Though it may vary in its form, group fire seems not to discriminate on the basis of race, gender, education, economic class, or culture. In a wonderful documentary film titled *Dalai Lama Renaissance*, forty of the West's most innovative and enlightened thinkers were invited to the home of His Holiness in northern India. The guests included religious scholars, writers, at least two quantum physicists, and a psychiatrist. When they arrived, they were asked by the Dalai Lama to work together to come up with a "solution to some of the world's problems" and to identify "the transitions we must make if we're going to survive." What transpires over the course of several days is a portrait of group fire. The esteemed guests could not agree on a format for their discussions, let alone on any solutions. Bickering, interrupting, showboating, or simply getting lost in wishful thinking, they struggled to collaborate. In the midst of the arguing one participant pleaded, "I'd like to feel a little compassion here." One leaves this film with a simultaneous sense of hopelessness ("If these folks can't get it right, how are the rest of us supposed to learn to work together skillfully?") and relief ("Now I don't feel so bad about all of my lousy meetings").

Conflict and emotional intensity are everywhere, and they are often a source of suffering. But high-heat moments are as natural and as neces-

sary to human progress as they are in nature. We need fire in our families, teams, organizations, and communities as much as our prairies and forests need a cyclical blaze to stay healthy. Nothing interesting or innovative has ever really happened in groups without the heat of passion, disagreement, fear, or confusion. In fact, fire is often the best indicator that people care about the issue with which they are struggling. The absence of heat almost always means apathy, suppression, or nonengagement.

GROUP FIRE CAN BE DESTRUCTIVE

As in nature, fire has both creative and destructive potential in meetings. The destructive aspects of group fire are the more familiar to most of us. Here are some of the less pleasant outcomes of group fires when they are not properly tended:

Suffering. When things heat up, people often become fearful and aggressive. With a single spark, dialogue can degrade into aggressive debate, unreasoned argument, and personal attack. Such interactions often result in winners and losers and can cause emotional pain for those on both sides.

Proliferation. Under the right conditions, a single high-heat conversation gone wrong can escalate and spread throughout an organization or community. For several years my wife and I lived in a condominium managed by a homeowners' association. At an annual meeting of the HOA, one member directed some personal and insulting remarks toward the president. For the following year, interactions within the entire community of neighbors—even those not present at the meeting—felt uncomfortable as people tried to figure out which “side” they were on or how to reconcile the rift. Two years after that meeting, trust had still not been fully restored.

Destruction. In a fire, groups often become overwhelmed and stuck in long-established patterns of defensiveness. Energy and goodwill get used up as people talk past one another. Money is invested and reinvested to “deal with” the consequences of false starts and reactive decisions. People burn out and relationships are destroyed.

GROUP FIRE CAN BE CREATIVE

What is the creative potential of fire in groups? How do emotional intensity, messiness, and disagreement serve us? Why on earth would we want to welcome it into our meetings?

Energy. We’ve known this lesson since the earliest days of humanity. The more difficult an issue, the more energy we need to tackle it. People bring the heat of their convictions and passions into a room, and this very same heat is often the source of discord. But the dissension is nothing more than an affirmation that people are alive and in pursuit of what matters to them.

Illumination. The fire of group adversity or breakdown is often exactly what people need to see an old problem in a completely new light. Conflict and bewilderment are often the necessary precursors to new ways of viewing the current reality and future possibilities. In the fire, people’s gifts and limitations are also illuminated for all to see. In this sense fire is a teacher. In Washington State I worked with a governor-appointed task force made up of police investigators, district attorneys, policymakers, and health care and social service professionals. They came together to formulate statewide guidelines on how to investigate the sexual abuse of children in institutions. At moments during the deliberation, strong disagreements and thinly veiled finger-pointing set off some pretty intense debates. During those very uncomfortable conversations the group discovered that each organizational entity had

significantly different, sometimes conflicting priorities when it came to investigating this kind of crime. They realized that each agency, in its own way, often undermined the success of an investigation. It was through this realization that the task force established a breakthrough road map for statewide interagency coordination.

Cleansing. Without the heat behind strong advocacy and direct confrontation, issues can accumulate just under the surface, eventually exploding into a more destructive social dynamic. When people are allowed to fully express their emotions and opinions, and when those are acknowledged, that clearing of the air feels like a fresh start.

Regeneration. In forests and other ecosystems, fires enable seeds to germinate and nutrients to be released into the soil. Likewise, groups who learn to use fire productively see it as an important “nutritional” source of learning and development. In coming through the fires of disagreement and confusion, groups learn some of their most important lessons, and the seeds of innovation are sown.

Transformation. About 3,500 years ago a glassblower figured out how to apply heat to a bucket of silica sand mixed with tree ash in order to transform those simple materials into a beautiful vessel. In the same way, organizations, groups, and individuals can come through the intensity of conflict having created new paradigms, reinvented strategies, restructured organizations, and forged never-before-imagined alliances.

As we sat on his back porch one afternoon, the Abraham Path founder William Ury and I recounted such a transformational meeting. He had been in Bethlehem, in the West Bank, hoping to gain local support for the Abraham Path, a hiking route that extends through and connects Middle Eastern countries that have been at war. The purpose of the Abraham Path is to provide a place of connection for people of all

faiths and cultures, inviting them to remember their common origins. Ury described what happened in the meeting.

Immediately they started to ask us, “Are you with the CIA? Is this part of a Zionist plot? Why are there no Palestinians on your board?” Then they started making demands. You could feel the distrust in the air. There was so much at stake, and I was concerned that this might be the burial of the Abraham Path project. I’d spent three years of my life, my money, and my credibility to arrive at this moment. I kept thinking to myself, “Let go. Abraham’s story is about letting go of control and trusting that a wisdom will emerge.” I managed to listen and resisted the urge to defend the project. We stuck with the conversation, letting the Palestinian leaders know that there was no way the Abraham Path would succeed unless it served the needs of their people.

Though no one who hears this story would have predicted it, today Bethlehem is one of the towns where the Abraham Path has the most support from local leaders! A willingness to stand in the fire with people who initially viewed him as the enemy resulted in a remarkable alliance and an innovative vehicle for peace building and reconciliation in a troubled part of the world.

The Anatomy of Group Fire

For those of us who choose to spend our time in groups that are experiencing both the destructive and creative impacts of group fire, it is useful to have a way of understanding and recognizing the different forms such fire can take.

The most common indications of fire are the visible expressions of fear, anger, aggression, and dissent. They are easy to recognize and can often feel overwhelming. In the very first strategic planning process I ever facilitated, the two company owners, brothers who had grown up

on the streets of Brooklyn, stood up simultaneously, leaned across the conference table, and began hurling profanities and waving their cigars at each other. I could see team members retreating to the refreshment table and ducking for cover in their notebooks. I was informed later that this was a normal conversation between the two brothers. One person's firestorm is another's cozy campfire.

A more subtle aspect of group fire is found in groups with a history of disappointment and injury. Members feel they have been burnt in the past. They find it difficult to let go of promises broken, insults never retracted, and contributions never acknowledged. Relationships are often tenuous, and people may feel exhausted and hopeless at the outset of the process. These groups are living out the aftermath of unresolved or poorly handled conflicts and of wounds inflicted during hard-fought battles. The groups may appear to have no heat, no motivation. However, more often their members are simply alienated, resigned, and filled with self-protective cynicism. They feel hesitant to offer what little energy they have left. This kind of despair is contagious, and it takes a strong leader to be the sole holder of possibility in a room full of defeat. The inner capacity of *holding possibility* will be explored further in chapter 5.

Another common facet of group fire is the often-silent struggle with uncertainty, doubt, and impatience. Like smoke, uncertainty and complexity create discomfort and obscure people's ability to see clearly. People can feel overwhelmed by the diversity of perspectives, the intricacy of issues, and the sheer number of ideas. Often, in an effort to ease distress and embarrassment, those "in charge," including the process facilitator, will attempt to oversimplify an issue or make a preemptive decision that returns the group to its comfort zone. But this kind of response undermines the group's capacity and perpetuates long-standing problems.

Destructive aspects of group heat have a way of showing up not only in high-stakes meetings but also in what we might have predicted to be routine, noncontroversial conversations. I'm often surprised by the way a casual comment such as "When is the lunch break?" or a subtle behavior like a side conversation can ignite my insecurities or provoke harsh, judgmental thoughts. Collaborative work has a way of inviting into the room all the lessons we need to learn about ourselves.

The Fire Within

Being a competent leader with a history of success has a little-discussed dark side. I've struggled with it most of my career. It is the belief that I can single-handedly hold a group process together and ensure the success of a meeting. I have often assigned too much importance to my role and too adamantly justified my views. I have too often looked to others to affirm my worth and contributions. In some ways, the more successful I have become, the more I find myself needing to acknowledge and gently confront these tendencies.

The rooms in which we work are often places of uneasiness. In the midst of conflict, confusion, and strong emotion, the heat is hard to miss. We hear people raising their voices or using inflammatory language. We watch them taking sides or working unspoken agendas. We see people rolling their eyes with disbelief or withdrawing entirely from the conversation.

As we face these moments of group intensity, we see things that annoy, embarrass, and frighten us. We experience self-doubt and feel overwhelmed. Our own actions or inaction in the moment are part of the fire. Are we making things better, or worse? Is the group beyond help, or are we just not smart enough to know what to do next?

When we get swept up in the group's heat, we want desperately to regain a sense of personal comfort. In order to achieve this, we might try

to suppress what we feel, becoming very mechanical in our response. We might attempt to rescue group members, take sides, blame others, or try to control people and outcomes through subtle manipulation. We might argue vehemently or withdraw into passivity. While these responses are normal in the sense that they protect us, they do little to aid the group in achieving its purpose or building its capacity to work through its reactions.

HABITS OF THE MIND

Each of us has unique habits of seeing, thinking, and doing. Our mental habits are the default beliefs about the way things are and the way they ought to be. They form over the course of our lives, based on our experiences, upbringing, education, and so on. They influence our judgments and interpretations. When we take our default way of seeing as the only way to see things, we are what author Ellen Langer calls “engaged in mindlessness.”¹ Habits of the mind are particularly dangerous in the fire when we decide what is “acceptable,” “appropriate,” and “attainable” and don’t question our assumptions.

As interactions become more intense, challenging, and personal, our minds fill with interpretations, memories, regrets, predictions, attachments, and resentments. We burn ourselves when we fail to remember that an infinite number of legitimate points of view can be taken on any given topic or situation.

You may see a challenging question from a group member as an insult to your authority, while another sees it as an invitation into dialogue. Still another may see it as a politically motivated move. It all depends on your habitual way of seeing things. The key is to be willing to hold your default beliefs and assumptions up for inspection, never assuming that they are the only truth in the room. We’ll examine the specific capacities related to maintaining an open mind in chapter 5.

EMOTIONAL HOT BUTTONS

In the fire, people and events can press up against our hot buttons—those places within us that feel susceptible and, at times, raw. Personal hot buttons grow out of trials and traumas in our lives. Some of us have hot buttons that get triggered by authority, rudeness, crying, or illogic. Others have hot buttons connected to not being liked or approved of by others. Each of us has different hot buttons, and it's important to know what they are.

The people, behavior, and events that push our hot buttons don't need to be dramatic or even visible to others. They can be as subtle as a raised eyebrow or a question about a suggested decision-making method. My hot button in the law enforcement meeting I described in the introduction wasn't the guns, the silence of the group, the divided room, or the palpable hostility. Any of those things could have been hot buttons, but they were not mine on that day. My hot button was the realization that I did not know what to do. At that early stage in my career, my whole professional identity was based on being the one in the room who always knew what to do and didn't have to ask. In my mind, visible uncertainty was a form of failure. I felt ashamed. As a result, my ability to see what was happening in the group, tap in to my wisdom, and take effective action was greatly compromised—not by the group's fire but by my self-inflicted heat. I was unconsciously allowing the group's fire to ignite myself into a state of panic.

When our hot buttons get pushed, the brain mobilizes to defend us from experiencing negative emotions, thoughts, and sensations. Our initial reaction is aimed at protecting ourselves from feeling the underlying trauma. Before our higher intelligence can intervene, it gets commandeered by primitive parts of the brain and we go into fight-or-flight mode. We might become defensive, argumentative, or self-righteous. These impulsive responses—very human default reactions—comfort us,

but they can also undermine our ability to take deliberate action in service to the group. What makes hot buttons even more challenging is that the brain appears to be wired to prevent or reverse a fear response once it's triggered.²

IDENTITY AND EGO

Research has consistently demonstrated that we humans are prone to see ourselves as more capable, likable, self-aware, and selfless than we actually are.³ But when we identify too strongly with any quality, we set ourselves up for disappointment.⁴ The influence of ego is a reality, particularly when we are working in high-heat situations. I use the term *ego* not in the formal Freudian sense but as shorthand for one's idealized self-image or the stories we tell ourselves and others about who we are.

The problem comes when reality collides with the inflated self-image we've worked hard to construct. I like to think of myself as someone who is sensitive to the needs of all kinds of people. Recently it was pointed out to me during a workshop that some of the experiential exercises were designed in ways that excluded people with certain kinds of physical disabilities. I worked hard in the moment to correct the oversight, but inside, I was distracted by feelings of shame that in a very public setting, I had not lived up to the image of myself as "enlightened" regarding differences in physical ability. And in that moment, I had to remind myself that my ego was messing with me.

Our ego fuels our need to win, to be right, to be superior. The ego is the part of us that equates our worth with our reputation and

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achievements. So when something about a meeting begins to go off track, and group confusion or an impasse makes the hoped-for outcomes less likely, we fear we won't live up to our self-image. When we don't know what to do as things become messier, we feel self-conscious and embarrassed about asking for help. We feel psychologically at risk, and this can trigger a kind of fight-or-flight response. In these moments, unless we can acknowledge that the image of ourselves we have constructed is an illusion, we remain in our own fire.

WE BURN OURSELVES

Here's the good news: There is no heat unless we inflict it upon ourselves. Regardless of how hot the fire gets "out there" in the meeting, we have the ability to control our own thermostat. The fire does not determine how intensely we experience the heat. *We* determine that. *We* determine whether we move into habitual patterns of fighting, fleeing, or freezing in the face of uncomfortable group dynamics. The ability to choose our own internal state in the face of external heat is the essence of intentional, high-integrity leadership. It dictates whether we will be able to offer calm presence and wise action when they are most needed.

We know that the heat is of our own making because two people in the same room at the same high-heat moment can experience that moment in very different ways. The master facilitator and author Roger Schwarz told me about a meeting he co-facilitated early in his career. He was in a union-management meeting when a conflict began to escalate. Participants began raising their voices, making accusations, and threatening to walk out. He recalls the perspiration dripping from his forehead. In his moment of panic, he looked over at his co-facilitator, who was older and more experienced. His colleague, smiling from ear to ear, said, "Wow, this is really getting interesting, isn't it?"

That is a hopeful story. We think we are navigating a big group

storm, and then we realize we have manufactured the storm. The consultant Chris Corrigan described his insight that fires and storms are really illusions. Chris said, “Difficult situations are made difficult by me to a much larger extent than by others. It’s really a storm depending on how I see it. . . . When I am fearless, I am just standing in a rain shower.”⁵ As we will see in the next chapter, doing our own work on our fears enables us to control our personal thermostats when we face the heat out there. We can learn to see, hear, and sense the intense heat in groups without taking it on ourselves. We don’t need to be impervious or above it all. Nor do we need to avoid having our hot buttons pushed. Our buttons will get pushed. Our personal vulnerabilities will appear as they show up in the group’s dynamic, like a mirror into our psyche. But we don’t have to act on them. Nor do we need to suppress them. As we’ll explore in chapter 11, we can develop practices that aid us in noticing strong emotional reactions without allowing them to take over. We can learn to experience the pull of strong feelings without abandoning our inner wisdom and good judgment.

Our work throughout the rest of this book is to let the fire we create within ourselves become the teacher that strengthens our capacity to stand purposefully when a calm, compassionate, unwavering leader is most needed. Our hot-button moments are really moments of truth that point to the places where we need to open our hearts and minds rather than collapse into self-protection. These moments when we can feel the fire within are, as the Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön says, “like messengers that show us, with terrifying clarity, exactly where we’re stuck.”⁶ Our self-generated fire is a messenger that carries insights into what it means to lead with clarity, calm, and courage. It is through these deeply personal, sometimes painful insights that we learn to stand in the intensity of group fire and tend its creative potential.



WHEN PEOPLE COME TOGETHER TO ADDRESS HIGH-stakes issues, things can get heated—emotionally intense, uncomfortable, and at times personal. This is group fire. It's pervasive, natural, and necessary to human progress. Without the heat of passion and conviction, meetings rarely produce anything interesting or innovative. Because group fire can also be a source of destruction and suffering, we need to learn to channel its energy. Tending to the heat without being swept up by it is the challenge of standing well in the fire.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Think about the last high-heat meeting you facilitated. What were the indicators that the group was experiencing high heat? What did people say and do?
- Did a recent event or individual in a meeting push one of your hot buttons? What was your response in the moment? What did you feel? What were you thinking to yourself?
- When you are leading groups, what causes you to feel defensive, impatient, or anxious? What internal narratives and beliefs are connected with these feelings?
- What are the unrealistic or perfectionist expectations you have of yourself as a meeting convener? In what situations do you begin to feel stressed or vulnerable because you are not living up to those expectations?

- Have you experienced a time when you felt like reacting but you were able to make a more intentional choice rather than react from impulsiveness or defensiveness? What enabled you to do this?

TRY THIS

As you go about your daily and weekly activities, notice which interactions have heat and what form it takes. Where are you noticing high levels of passion and conviction? Where do things appear to be contentious or personal? When do you notice the absence of fire in group interactions? Notice your judgments and emotions as you observe and participate in the heat of daily interactions. Take a moment to write down what you would most like to learn about group fire and about yourself as someone who convenes people in high-heat conversations.

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