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The Flow of Fight energy

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"Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic" (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Yvonne Agazarian's radical way to describe fight energy was one of the things that deeply engaged me in SCT, back in 2009. She identified and normalized something for me that was at the time totally clouded, surrounded by shame and guilt and subject to self judgement. Until then, the sober fact that the experience and enactment of fight energy is a universal human trait, never occurred to me. What a revelation and liberation it was to explore it as such, rather than shame it away!

When I started to apply SCT concepts in my work as consultant in organizations, I realized for the first time how much the enactment of fight energy determined the atmosphere in the workplace: bosses who blamed and outraged or who were simply so dominant that most workers chose docile compliancy as a coping mechanism; teams that always looked for scapegoats to channel fight energy towards; or teams that joked around, in the process scaring away all creativity. In organizations where the mere mentioning of fight energy was taboo, everyone needed to work together harmoniously and if not, something 'really bad' was going on, resulting in passive aggression and self-attack (boomeranging). Thanks to SAVI (Benjamin et.al., 2012) I also became aware of more hidden enactments of fight energy, like complaining and sarcasm and how all these enactments were contagious.

So, as I, together with my colleague Hella Ritz, started to bring SCT to organizations, we were aware that getting clients to recognize, understand, normalize, and play with fight energy was key to making a difference. We wanted to visualize Agazarian's thinking (Agazarian, 1997, p. 187-188) on fight energy and created a flowchart (in 2014) with two forks that clarified on a conceptual level how fight energy flowed. The chart is included in the book 'Leve het Team' (Kunneman P. & Nordhauzen P. 2022, p. 44.)
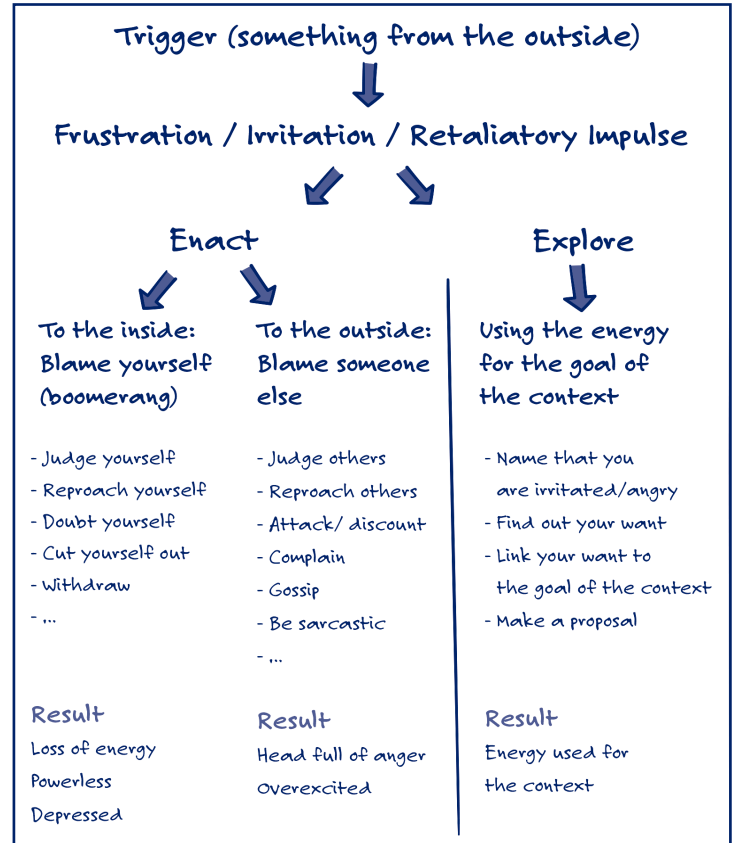
In this article I want to share our experiences with this chart as it may be a helpful tool for the SCT community when sharing Agazarian's thinking about fight energy. In the beginning we made the mistake of working with the chart when a group was still in flight. This resulted sometimes in a silent dead-in-the-water group (between flight and fight). Although this is progress from flight, it is forced rather than stemming from systematically undoing flight behaviors

Once the group has undone the restraining forces in the flight phase we can use functional subgrouping demonstrated in the script below. The script can be called 'informed fiction,' although most quotes are real quotes taken from the 100+ subgrouping rounds we did with many different teams from different organizations. The subgrouping takes place after we discuss the 'Flow of Fight Energy' chart with the group and after Flight phase restring forces have been reduced.

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Subgrouping around the Chart:

L: We have now seen how fight energy flows in us with the two forks that determine how the energy works out. Let us subgroup around your experience as you let the chart sink in.

M1: I look differently at the fight energy that goes around in our team. I see how often I trigger fight energy in others and how easy I get triggered myself. AE?

L: Do you know how you trigger fight energy in others?

M1: Yes, by interrupting and raising my voice.

M2: Paraphrases M1 and builds: I am in that subgroup. I enjoy a good business discussion, but now I realize how much fight energy gets enacted in these discussions, while seldom leading to useful outcomes.

M3: Paraphrases M2 and builds: I know I am already enacting my retaliation before I blink an eye. The fork between enacting and exploring is just theoretical for me. It looks like a fork for saints-only, not for people in organizations.

L: Do you experience an retaliatory impulse right now about this, maybe towards us, the coaches?

M3: Yes, in fact I do.

L: What is it you would like to say to us, so we never present forks for saints-only anymore.

M3: Get real, folks. Don't pull our legs with unattainable choices.

L: How does it feel to say that?

M3: I feel power. Anyone else?

M4: Paraphrases M3. I have a difference when the group is ready.

L: is the group ready for a difference?

M4: I am embarrassed by my own tendency to boomerang and habitually turn my anger on myself.

L: Do you have a boomerang right now?

M4: Yes, I feel stupid never having seen that my feelings of depression result from fight energy turned inwards.

L: When did you first feel stupid?

M4: When you were explaining that chart, when you asked the group: "who defends you when you turn your aggression on yourself?"

L: What do you want to say to me that I make you feel stupid?

M4: Don't jump this stuff on me without warning.

L: How does it feel to say that?

M4: I feel less embarrassed.

L: Just say anyone else to see other reactions in the group.

M4: Anyone else?

Stays silent.

L: Is there information in the silent subgroup?

M5: Paraphrases M4. It makes me uncomfortable when members say these kinds of things to our coaches.

L: What is the source of your discomfort, a thought, an unknown sensation or the edge of the unknown?

M5: It is a thought. I am afraid we will soon be yelling at each other without restrictions.

L: Do you recognize that as a negative prediction?

M5: Yes.

L: Center and ask yourself the question: do you believe you can tell the future?

Discoveries

Based on the information that came up in these rounds of subgrouping around the flow of fight energy, we made several discoveries that made it easier to explore this topic in a group. One discovery we made, is to choose words that create the smallest difference from the SCT context in an organizational context. So, we learned to talk about frustration and irritation rather than anger or rage, about discomfort rather than anxiety or fear and about fight energy rather than a retaliatory impulse. When people access their retaliatory impulse, we learned not to ask them what they would like to do to the other person (too big of a difference), but rather what they would like to say to them.

As in our SCT community, in organizations there are people who find it hard to access their fight energy (before I learned SCT, I found pride in never being angry) and those who have easy and direct access to their retaliatory impulse. After working with that last subgroup, we work with a (mostly silent) subgroup that gets scared away into withdrawal. A common negative

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prediction we hear from that subgroup is that the threshold to enact violent behavior in real life will be lowered by exploring a RI in one's imagination (like M5 in the subgrouping above).

The route from trigger to enactment is very fast (milliseconds). As M3 says, he finds himself in enactment before he blinks an eye. Because of this speed (a well-worn path in our brain) it is hard to choose the other fork (exploration) at the very moment he gets triggered. The work is to catch the trigger when already enacting (which is hard enough) and go back up in the flowchart to the fork between enacting and exploring. The other way is to catch the retaliatory impulse right away, pause and take the exploring fork (more for saints, according to M3).

We teach our teams that the most basic skill to learn re fight energy is to name your irritation instead of enacting it: "I am irritated by the fact that you did not do this like we agreed" instead of "You failed again in doing what we agreed." This is not an easy skill to learn as the barrier to naming irritation is much higher than the barrier to lashing out on each other or themselves. The reason for this we hear most is that people are afraid they will spoil the relationship with their colleague, boss or client when they name their irritation, as in 'I am irritated by this.' Curiously enough this restrainer is not present when people enact their irritation with sarcasm, complaining or blaming. We also found that practicing the skill (of naming your irritation) with role play is helpful.

Setting up the role play, we first ask people to identify triggers for other people in the group (it is amazing how well people in a team know each other's triggers). Because the group is able to work in the fight phase, often this brings the relaxation and laughter of a work joke.

Then in the role play one person (#1) delivers the trigger sentence to the other (#2), like:

"You are late again" (dismissive tone) or

"Thorough work as always" (sarcastic tone) or

"Talked to the boss lately?" (insinuating tone)

We ask #2 to respond as usual, mostly with inward or outward enactment. #1 responds naturally to the enactment, mostly with enacted fight energy also. We explore with the group how that works out (not so well).

#1 then delivers the trigger again.

We then and ask #2 to say what experience happens inside, like 'what you say irritates me'. #1 then responds naturally. Very often they have no more text from the leaders to follow and respond something like 'that was not my intention'.

Our clients report how mastering this basic skill (naming one's irritation) changes the communication in their work and how it helps them to take up authority in their roles.

The flow of fight energy chart helps to seed the process of using flight energy to take up functional roles and provides a visual framework that clarifies the forks we have when dealing with our Retaliatory Impulse.

References

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