How to Observe a Fractal

by Michael Grinder

If you can see half of what you look at, you are good.
If you know which half to look at, you are a genius.

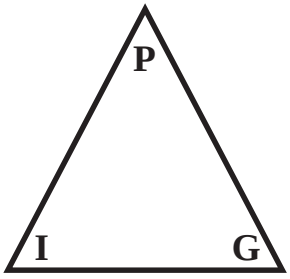
When we first meet with a new group, what do we watch for? What group behaviors will quickly give us the most reliable information about the group culture?

Essential to our identifying a culture is determining how much weight to assign to the behaviors we observe. As a person-in-charge new to a group, how do we figure out which observations have the most weight?

The answer is found in a mathematical concept—the fractal. In a fractal, each part has the same properties as the whole. *Fractal* is a useful concept because when we learn how to identify a fractal, we give ourselves a practical tool to reveal the values of a culture. The skill of recognizing fractals is useful any time we observe a culture, and it is especially valuable if the culture is new to us. Often times a fractal gives information not only about the group, but about the entire organization/system.

We train ourselves as observers of the group dynamic triangle to determine if a certain behavior is a fractal. Here's how it works:

Group dynamics is the interaction between the person-in-charge, individuals or subgroups and the group as a whole. Group dynamics can be represented by a triangle with the symbols of P I G.



1. Behavior occurs. Any corner (person-in-charge, an individual / subgroup or the group as a whole) can do the behavior.
2. Observer notices the response of the other two corners.
    a. If the other corner doesn't shift their breathing, then the behavior is typical of the group—it is a fractal.
    b. If there is a sudden change in breathing of the two responding corners then it shows that the behavior is unusual within the culture, and therefore is not a fractal.

3. Observer assigns *weight* to observation. The more the fractal behavior is unusual—that is, not found in most other cultures, the more weight the observer assigns to the behavior as a valuable clue to the culture being observed. Here's an example.

   We are observing a group beginning a staff meeting. As some staff members enter and take a seat, they turn their chairs to face *away from* the boss. Neither the boss nor other group members change their breathing as people do this behavior.

   Because no one is breathing high, we know we have discovered a fractal; this behavior is normal for this group. Compared to most cultures it is unusual for employees to sit with their backs to the person who will be leading the staff meeting. This is an unusual behavior so it is given a lot of weight.

   But if we were watching the same behavior in a classroom of 14 years old—students filing in and sitting with their backs to the teacher—we wouldn't assign much weight at all because this behavior is typical of adolescents.

So to observe well we have to:

1. Have observed many different cultures so we can compare what we are observing now against a generic set of behavioral norms.
2. Check out how each of the corners of the group dynamic triangle is responding to a behavior.
3. Observe breathing, especially after "unusual" behaviors. Breathing is the most accurate, cross-cultural reaction to observe.

Based on these axioms we can say:

A. If one corner does a behavior and the other corners do not shift their breathing, then the behavior is done often in this culture. The behavior is a fractal.

B. If the other corners do shift their breathing, then the behavior is not done often. Because it is not frequently done in this culture, the behavior is not a fractal.

C. In comparing any corner's behavior, the more unusual the behavior is compared to generic cultural norms, the more weight is assigned to that behavior. Also the more unusual the other corner's reactions is compared to generic cultural norms, the more weight is assigned to that behavior.