What a Classic Psychological Experiment Can Teach Us Concerning the Value of Global Business Relationships

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ABSTRACT

In the 1950s social psychologist Muzafer Sherif presented his landmark studies on groups in harmony and tension. What he discovered about the creation and resolution of intergroup hostility has direct bearing on the conduct of contemporary global business relationships. His findings are presented as a reminder to those who wish to understand the critical role of international trade in furthering world peace and prosperity.

For many decades there have been business and political leaders who challenged the value and wisdom of international trade. Boycotts, quotas, tariffs, patent and trademark infringements—even instances of outsourcing and cultural differences in management: all these actions and issues have created an atmosphere where even trading partners have come to see each other as adversaries rather than allies when it came to doing international business. This thinking is not only wrong; it is potentially tragic should it lead to a reduction in global business deals. The problem is that few people recognize that with the changing political, population and production issues confronting the world in the 21st century, expanding and strengthening global business relationships gives humankind its best chance of survival and prosperity in the decades to come.

It is critical that contemporary managers throughout the world realize that they are partners in a mutually beneficial relationship! In fact, one reason why global business relationships have experienced such difficulties in the past is because trading partners saw themselves as adversaries: and it is this antagonistic historical legacy that has made the idea of a mutually beneficial relationship between trading nations so difficult to achieve.

THE SHERIF STUDIES: A HISTORICAL ANTECEDENT TO A COOPERATIVE—RATHER THAN ADVERSARIAL—MODEL OF GLOBAL BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS

In the 1950s, social psychologist Muzafer Sherif conducted an innovative experiment with two groups of 11-year-old boys at a summer camp. It is the belief of these authors that the Sherif investigation has direct bearing on the conduct of nations involved in international business…and his findings are presented as a reminder to those who would attempt to understand and shape global business practices.

THE EXPERIMENT

Every year hundreds of thousands of American children make their annual migration to summer camp. There they swim, fish, shoot, canoe, learn arts and crafts, and go on overnight trips. At a camp in Oklahoma they also (unknowingly) became experimental subjects in Dr. Sherif’s study of intergroup relations.

A psychology experiment in a summer camp might sound strange. Yet, in actuality, Dr. Sherif chose this particular “laboratory” for sound scientific reasons: isolated from the outside world, the summer campsite provided a place where scientific control could be more readily achieved, a place where Sherif and his staff could manipulate the environment and observe the campers in a naturalistic setting, without fear that disturbances from the outside world would confound their results.

The campers that Sherif chose for his experiment were a counselor’s dream: twenty-two healthy, well-adjusted 11-year-old boys, all from stable, middle-class families and in the upper half of their classes in scholastic standing. None of the boys had been problem children at home, in the neighborhood, or in school. They were basically peaceful
pre-teenagers. Yet, in a matter of weeks, they would be aggressively embroiled in a full-scale camp war under the watchful eye of the camp staff.

This camp war did not occur accidentally. It was an outgrowth of carefully planned experimental manipulations designed to help Dr. Sherif answer two basic questions: (1) How does intergroup conflict arise? (2) How can such conflict be reduced? In answering these inquiries, Dr. Sherif divided his camp study into three parts.

(1) **Stage of group formation.** Before one can study intergroup relations, one has to have groups. In the group-formation stage, two independent, cohesive groups were created. This involved, first, an attempt by Dr. Sherif and his staff to divide the 22 campers into two equal units, making sure that the physical skills and sizes of the campers were roughly equivalent in each unit. Once this was done, the boys were transported, in separate buses, to opposite ends of the campsite and billeted in separate cabins. Then, for about a week, the boys in each cabin participated in activities designed to foster the growth of well-developed groups. These activities included canoe trips over rough terrain and cookout overnight trips, the kinds of highly appealing tasks that require concerted, cooperative effort to carry out and build esprit de corps among the participants. Once each cabin unit had developed into a well-defined group, both groups were brought together for the first time, and the second stage of the experiment commenced.

(2) **Stage of intergroup conflict.** Just as one cannot study intergroup relations without groups, neither can one study the reduction of intergroup conflict without first producing that conflict. The question is: How does one produce conflict between two groups of campers who are basically well-behaved and peaceful? Dr. Sherif gives an important hint with the following hypothesis: “When members of two groups come into contact with one another in a series of activities that embody goals which each urgently desires, but which can be attained by one group only at the expense of the other, competitive activity toward the goal changes, over time, into hostility between the groups and their members” (Sherif & Sherif, 1969, p. 239).

Now what “series of activities” can be conducted at a summer camp that “embodies goals which each [group] urgently desires, but which can be attained by one group only at the expense of the other?” For those who have been to camp, one answer probably comes to mind immediately: a color war. For those unfamiliar with this term, a color war is a kind of Junior Olympics, a time when the camp is divided into teams (each team designated by a color) that compete in a series of athletic events lasting from a day to a week or more. When all the events are completed, the team with the highest total score wins the color war. As any camper or counselor who has gone through such an experience will attest, a color war creates a fierce sense of competition and team pride that permeates the whole camp while the contest is in progress.

Making use of the color war potential for creating intergroup hostility, Dr. Sherif and the camp staff arranged for the boys of the two cabins to oppose each other in a tournament that included baseball, football, tent pitching, and tug-of-war contests. In a very short time, what had begun as a friendly competition between two groups of peaceful boys deteriorated into an inter-cabin donnybrook, replete with name calling, fisticuffs, cabin raids, and property destruction. Dr. Sherif notes: “If an outside observer had entered the situation after the conflict began he could only have concluded on the basis of their behavior that these boys (who were the ‘cream of the crop’ in their communities) were either disturbed, vicious, or wicked youngsters” (p. 254).

There was no question about it: intergroup conflict had been solidly achieved at Dr. Sherif’s summer camp. The problem now was to end it. The whole purpose of the experiment was to find a way of reducing intergroup conflict; and judging from the behavior of Dr. Sherif’s campers, there would never be a better time to find the solution.

(3) **Reduction of intergroup conflict.** Through experimental manipulation, Dr. Sherif had first created conditions conducive to the formation of groups and then to the onset of hostilities between them. Now, in the final stage of the experiment, Dr. Sherif set out to create harmony when only tension existed.

Several approaches were tried. One emphasized an appeal to the moral values shared by members of both groups. Another involved bringing the groups together at events that were very enjoyable: activities like picnics, movies, etc. None of them worked.
The one approach that Dr. Sherif believed would work—and did—involved the use of superordinate goals in the reduction of intergroup conflict. “Superordinate goals are those goals that have a compelling appeal for members of each group, but that neither group can achieve without participation of the other” (p. 256).

To demonstrate that accomplishing superordinate goals leads to reduced intergroup hostility, Dr. Sherif and his staff rigged the camp program so that highly desirable activities and outcomes could only be achieved through the joint cooperation of the two groups. For example, one day on an outing, the two groups of boys were faced with a terrible problem: hot, tired, and hungry, they reached their campsite only to discover that the truck which was to deliver the campers’ food and water was stuck in a ditch and needed to be pulled onto the road. One group of campers got a rope, tied it around the truck’s fender and began to tug. The vehicle did not move, and it became obvious that one group working alone did not have the strength to accomplish the task. When both groups pulled on the rope together, however, they were able—with their combined strength—to get the truck started and on its way.

Joint efforts in situations such as the stalled truck episode did not immediately dispel hostility between the two groups. “But gradually,” Dr. Sherif notes, “the series of activities requiring interdependent action reduced conflict and hostility between the groups…In the end, the groups were actively seeing opportunities to intermingle, to entertain and ‘treat’ each other” (p. 256).

All’s well that ends well. On the last day of the camp session the boys were given the choice of returning home together on one bus or on two separate buses, one for each group. They voted to return together.

SUPERORDINATE GOALS AND GLOBAL BUSINESS COOPERATION

From peace to war and back to peace again. At least in his summer camp, Dr. Sherif seemed to create conflict or cooperation at his bidding. Now nobody is suggesting that what Dr. Sherif did with a group of boys in Oklahoma he could do as easily with nations conducting international business. But what Dr. Sherif learned about the induction and reduction of intergroup hostility might very well be applicable to enhancing global business relationships.

In our contemporary world we face many pressing problems that can be solved only through the cooperation of nations working together in economy harmony. Just as Dr. Sherif’s campers could not move the truck without intergroup cooperation, neither can we move the world successfully forward without nations working together to achieve economic success.

Please do not misunderstand. We are not saying that it is unhealthy or unnatural to experience some “adversarial” confrontations between global trading partners: there are bound to be some areas of disagreement between trading partners, just as there are between marital partners and business partners in the same organization. Disagreements and differences of opinion can be healthy to all parties if carried out in the proper spirit and context. What is being suggested is that contemporary management perception of global business should be more in keeping with the true reality of the situation. Global trading partners are like Siamese twins, joined together in a struggle for survival. You cannot cut off one-half and expect the other half to survive and prosper.

Individuals and nations involved in global business should think in terms of cooperation rather than conflict; harmony rather than tension. Global business presents participating trading partners with a “natural” superordinate goal: the best chance to achieve productivity, profit and even world peace (after all, if you’re an active trading partner with another country are you going to set out to destroy it?). In fact, one might reasonably argue that the greatest advantage of having an interconnected group of nations—bound together by economic ties—is the chance for lasting peace.

Global business presents participating countries with a “natural” superordinate goal. It would be a shame if participating individuals and nations did not grasp the opportunity to cooperate in the achievement of that goal. Recall the all-important Sherif hypothesis: “When members of two groups come into contact with one another in a series of activities that embody goals which each urgently desires, but which can be attained by one group only at the expense of the other, competitive activity toward the goal changes, over time, into hostility between the groups and their members” (p. 239).
It would be an unnecessary tragedy for those doing global business to waste energy fighting each other on the mistaken assumption that only one group can win at the expense of the other, when, in fact, the only way either team can win is through the mutual cooperation of both.

As long as those involved in global business insist on viewing their interaction in terms of a win-lose situation, only a lose-lose result can occur, particularly in today’s world, where we face more challenges than ever before. Let us take the lessons we have learned through the Sherif studies and work out their specific applications in the arena of global business relationships. Once we decide to see international business as a superordinate goal, we will have achieved one of the best business decisions ever made!

REFERENCES