



## Difference Matrix:

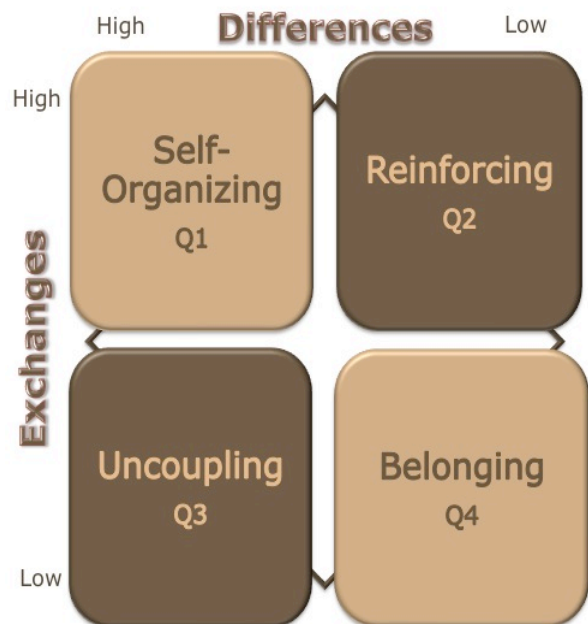
### Responding to Emerging Group Dynamics

*Royce Holladay*

How often have you been involved in a meeting that spiraled out of control as people moved toward open discussion at the tops of their lungs? Or when have you experienced a committee meeting or even a family get-together where individuals and/or groups were disengaged and almost lethargic? Or when have you been a part of a team where the members were highly engaged and enjoyed their work together, but all their talk never led to any productive learning or activity? All too often we face scenarios like this as we work and play in groups, teams, organizations and communities. This month's tool, the Difference Matrix, helps highlight the dynamics of these types of situations among individuals or between groups or teams. It also points toward viable options for action to shift those dynamics to increase productivity and improve interactions.

The Difference Matrix describes two conditions or dynamics that generate patterns of interaction and decision making in a group:

- The first condition is represented along the vertical axis of the matrix and refers to the Exchanges of the group. This condition describes the degree to which members of the group engage with each other. Low levels of exchange are represented in the lower half of the matrix, while high levels of exchange are represented in the upper half of the matrix.
- The second condition is represented along the horizontal axis of the matrix and refers to the Differences among the group members. To what degree are the members different from each other? High levels of difference are plotted on the left column of the matrix, and low levels of difference are plotted on the right column of the matrix.



Each quadrant in the matrix describes a set of patterns that can emerge as a result of the particular combinations of conditions. These patterns can be characterized along a continuum for each quadrant. At one end of the continuum are the behaviors that indicate a healthy group's movement toward fitness and sustainability. At the other end of the spectrum are indicators that the group needs to move to a different quadrant to become more fit and sustainable.

## Self-Organizing

(People who are very different from each other exchange across differences.)



**Quadrant 1  
(Q1)  
High Exchange  
High Difference**

Exchanges can help them learn and grow in a process of adaptation.

Exchanges can lead to fighting, other forms of open conflict, and ultimately to exhaustion.

## Reinforcing

(People who are very similar exchange strongly around those similarities.)



**Quadrant 2  
(Q2)  
High Exchange  
Low Difference**

Exchanges are fun and comfortable, and group members find their time together energizing.

Exchanges can lead to a lack of productivity and creativity that can result in group think.

## Uncoupling

(People who are different from each other withdraw, with little or no exchange.)



**Quadrant 3  
(Q3)  
Low Exchange  
High Difference**

Lack of exchange can give time and space to gain clarity, autonomy, and can allow people to rest.

Lack of exchange can lead to isolation, unresolved conflicts, and ultimately to total withdrawal.

## Belonging

(People are similar to each other but don't create exchanges to any great degree.)



**Quadrant 4  
(Q4)  
Low Exchange  
Low Difference**

These groups are stable, giving participants a sense of safety and security.

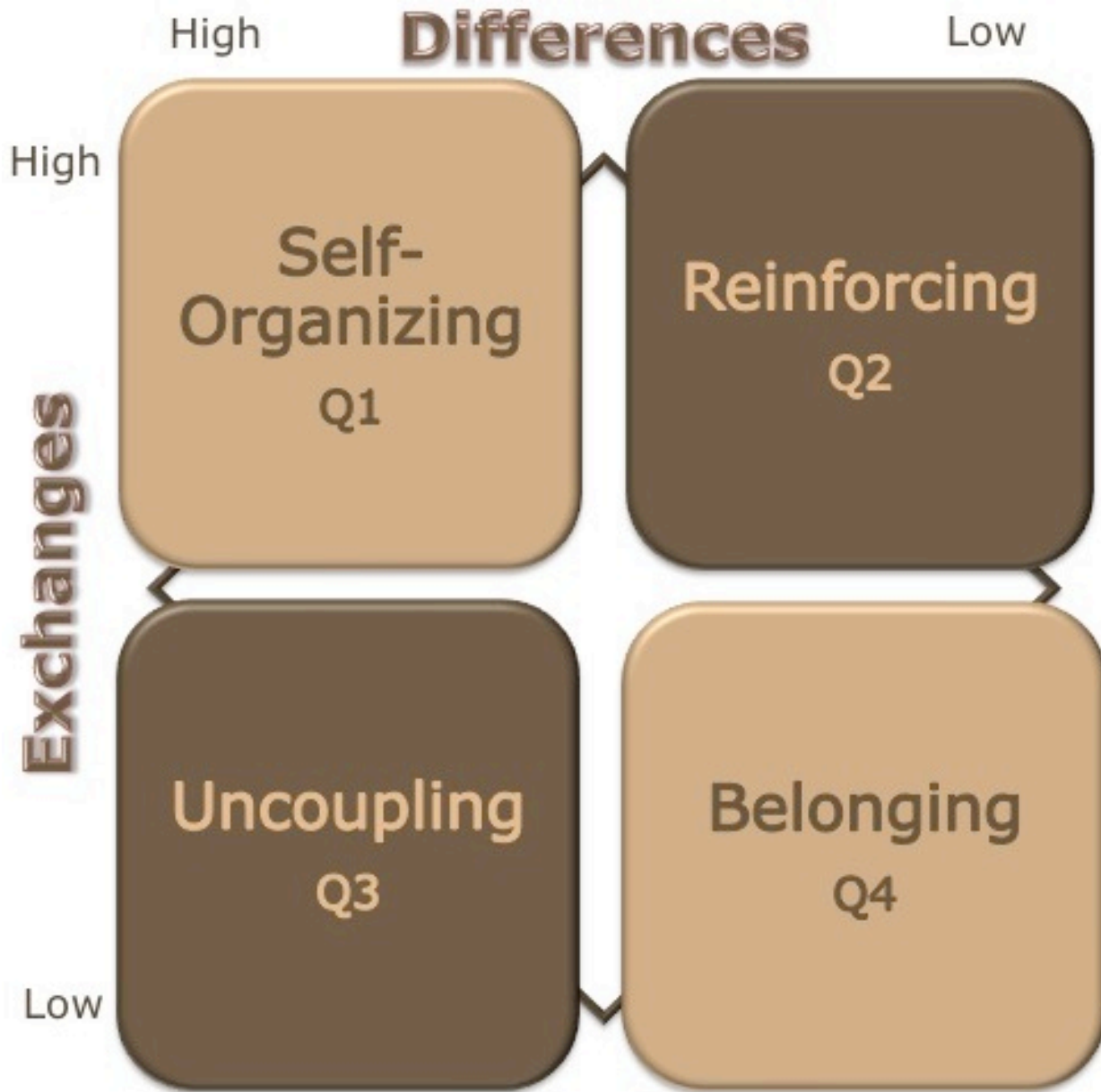
Limited exchange can become boring, static, and lead to the "death" of the group.

Individual response in each of these situations is critical to maintaining the health and fitness of the group. The following table describes what a leader or facilitator can watch for to assess the overall health and/or productivity of groups in each quadrant. It also includes suggestions for how to shift the group to a more productive quadrant when necessary, suggesting possible HSD-based models and methods to use [that can](#) assist in that shift.

	<b>Indicates fitness...</b>	<b>Move toward this quadrant...</b>	<b>Indicates lack of fitness...</b>	<b>Move away from this quadrant...</b>
<b>Quadrant 1</b> <i>High Exchange High Difference</i>	Discussion embraces new ideas Ideas are coherent with goals Everyone is welcomed into the discussion Risk taking is supported	Invite and explore difference Ask questions Make sure everyone in the group participates	Arguments emerge and move toward violent conflict Concepts and perspectives become locked in People tell their own stories rather than listening to others'	Call a time out Ask people to identify ways they are similar Role playing where individuals take the role of the other side
<b>Quadrant 2</b> <i>High Exchange, Low Difference</i>	People recognize and celebrate similarities Teams or groups support individual and group success People work to find common ground for moving forward	Share and celebrating common stories Emphasize shared interests and humor Identify a commonly shared commitment	People focus on similarities, ignoring external evidence People actively damp or ignore difference Group ignores need for coherence with external world	Identify value in perspectives that are different from the dominant culture Amplify differences in the group Invite reflection about external data and/or evidence
<b>Quadrant 3</b> <i>Low Exchange, High Difference</i>	People allow for and tolerate difference People seek a "cooling down" space Simple rules guide behavior across differences Insular groups live in peace side by side	Reflect on productive differences in the group Groups learn about others' unique cultures Disengage from active disagreement or conflict	People isolate and amplify differences Bias and prejudice emerge as a result of difference and isolation People become unwilling to engage across differences	Engage in discourse to amplify similarities Explore possibilities and opportunities found in difference Learn about cultural and/or operational differences that separate
<b>Quadrant 4</b> <i>Low Exchange, Low Difference</i>	People understand each other and don't need much discourse People work independently toward shared goals People find comfort in silence and reflection	Reflect individually on ways people are similar Identify similar goals for individual work Enforce simple rules for individual groups	People don't take advantage of their similarities People become highly competitive Turf issues prevent collaboration	Ask people to take advantage of others' contributions Find ways to work together toward shared goals Amplify similarities and support collaboration

The Difference Matrix offers quick insights into patterns of interaction and exchange that help us understand the underlying dynamics. With understanding about what is feeding or fueling those dynamics comes the ability to take action to shift those patterns toward greater productivity and/or usefulness. Whether we are concerned with our own families and neighborhoods, our local organizations and teams, or with national or global confrontations, this is both a model that can help us understand where we stand and a method for helping us move toward greater sustainability.

# Difference Matrix



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