Holding Environments at Work

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Holding environments are interpersonal or group-based relationships that enable self-reliant workers to manage situations that trigger potentially debilitating anxiety. Working from a theoretical framework woven of concepts from developmental and clinical psychology, group dynamics, and organizational behavior, the author describes holding environments, the conditions that facilitate their creation, and the points at which they are vulnerable to failure. He also discusses the group, intergroup, and organizational contexts that shape the extent to which holding environments at work are realistic or desirable.

Workers are increasingly responsible for managing their own careers, that is, ensuring that they add enough value to justify their continued employment in organizations facing severe competition (Hakim, 1994; Mirvis & Hall, 1996). This constitutes a different sort of company-employee relationship contract, away from employee guarantees of loyalty in exchange for lifetime job security and toward an entrepreneurial relationship in which organizations make investments (of time, money, and training) in employees and look for dividends (Handy, 1994; Kotter, 1995). Under the terms of this contract, individuals may receive large pay-offs but at the cost of an organization-provided sense of security. This refers not just to job security but to psychological security as well. In the increasingly “boundaryless organization” (Ashkenas, Ulrich, Jick, & Kerr, 1995), members are not only no longer sure of their tenure but no longer know precisely what to do, who to do it with, and how it ought to be done (Handy, 1994).

I greatly appreciate the comments and suggestions of Clayton Alderfer and the two reviewers on an earlier draft of this article.

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Insecurity and anxiety will remain a facet of organizational life as the trend toward self-reliance at work increases (Kegan, 1994). Mismanaging such insecurity and anxiety is costly to individuals who are disabled in moments of uncertainty, confusion, or distress and to organizations that depend on their work. Traditionally, organization members were supported by hierarchical superiors, mentors, and departmental coworkers who were more or less able to provide resources, protection, and buffering, solutions, training, and advice, with some assurance of successful outcomes (Kotter, 1995). The traditional hierarchical structure routinely managed anxiety through the provision of predictability and certainty (Hirschhorn, 1990). Hierarchical systems, in conjunction with support from leaders, coworkers, and mentors, offered a reasonable base of security that felt trustworthy and stable to organization members.

Increasingly, organizational hierarchies offer less security. The environments in which organizations operate are less predictable. The problems that members face are less familiar, with a narrower range of known solutions (Heifetz, 1994). Experienced organization members are less able to predict and control the means by which particular ends will occur, given uncertain environments, rapidly changing markets and technology, and lack of knowledge about sophisticated products and processes (Handy, 1994). Leaders and mentors are often in the position of knowing as little or less about daily operations than do their subordinates and mentees (Hirschhorn, 1990; Kram, 1996). No longer can individuals count on others to provide rules, goals, clear promotional ladders, and protection. Workers must rely, above all, on themselves.

Yet there is a paradox at the heart of self-reliance: People are most capable of being fully self-reliant when they feel securely attached to trusted others (Bowlby, 1988). The decreasing sense of security from hierarchical systems increases pressure on coworkers to provide social support in the form of emotional (enabling others to feel cared for), instrumental (directly helping others), informational (providing information so others can cope with problems), and appraisal (providing information enabling others to evaluate themselves) help (House, 1981). Such behaviors, when performed and received in meaningful ways between supervisors and subordinates, colleagues, or mentors and mentees, lead to reduced stress, burnout, health problems, and turnover (Pines & Aronson, 1988). Yet in organizations whose members are working in conditions of scarcity—of time, resources, and energy—there is little slack for the ongoing provision of such support. Thus, a second-order paradox: Organization members who increasingly need support at work are less likely to be available to give or receive such support.

Organizations and their members must confront the paradoxes of self-reliance in modern organizational life. Theorists must as well. Theorists increasingly refer to the boundaryless organization, in which the lines between functions blur to ease people’s organizational identifications (Ashkenas et al., 1995). As an unexamined consequence, such organizations are underbounded, leaving their members struggling with imprecise role definitions, multiple and competing authorities, and difficulties in joining around shared tasks (Alderfer, 1980). We need to understand whether people’s inevitable needs for security can be met in the context of underbounded organizations, particularly those marked by mistrust and isolation. We need to conceptualize other structures that help manage people’s experiences of anxiety. In this article, I draw on
various literatures—developmental and clinical psychology, family systems theory, group dynamics, and organizational behavior—to suggest the holding environment as such a structure.

The idea of holding. The holding environment concept was developed by British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott (1965) to describe the nature of effective caregiving relationships between mothers and infants. Winnicott’s insight was that “good-enough mothering” involves physically holding infants, whose subsequent experiences of feeling safely encompassed enable the initiation and movement of developmental processes. When mothers (or other primary caregivers) create reliably safe boundaries that protect infants from potentially disruptive stimuli, they enable their children to experience themselves as valued and secure (Winnicott, 1960). The infants experience a protective space in which to safely examine and interact with what their worlds present, even when they are startled and temporarily need a secure base to which to retreat (Bowlby, 1980). The reliable meeting of infants’ physical needs—and later, of children’s psychological needs—provides a way to develop and strengthen their egos and enables them to gradually learn to meet, in Winnicott’s phrase, “the difficulties of life.” Individual development is thus a gradual strengthening of one’s capacity to handle environmental impingement. The child’s ability to strengthen his or her ego is founded on the original experience of being securely held (Balint, 1968; Kohut, 1977; Winnicott, 1965). The holding environment is the mother’s arms and all that enables those arms to be a safe place: the father’s provision of an indestructible home and his enjoyment of the mother-child relationship, the lack of disruption from others, and the physical space that presents comprehensible stimuli (Abram, 1996; Winnicott, 1960; 1965).

Winnicott and others further used the holding environment concept to describe the analytic setting (Balint, 1954; Modell, 1976; Winnicott, 1965). They note that psychoanalytic therapists try to create environments in which patients are enabled to temporarily regress without fear of impingement. The theory is that patients who have not fully processed earlier experiences (e.g., parental indifference, sibling death) need to be held by the analyst’s attention. Analysts mirror the mother’s primary maternal preoccupation with her infant (Abram, 1996). This allows patients to safely regress to the point at which suppressed material is consciously processed. The patients are released from the psychological places where they were developmentally halted; their capacities for ego functioning are strengthened to the point that they can increasingly meet the difficulties of life without experiencing as much disruptive impingement (Winnicott, 1965). The analyst creates the holding environment through unwavering attentiveness to the patient’s experiences, needs, and development; by facilitating the patient’s arriving at her or his own insights; by allowing, without judgment, the expression of affect, dreams, wishes, creativity, and play; by containing strong emotion; and by offering empathic interpretations (Balint, 1954; Modell, 1976; Winnicott, 1965).

These initial formulations of the holding environment emphasize the intensive relationships of caregiving and care receiving, in which mothers and analysts exist primarily to hold infants and patients, respectively. Subsequent applications of the concept broaden the notion that holding environments can occur in other types of settings. Res-
idential units whose occupants (e.g., at-risk youth) require the experience of reliable caregiving have been examined as holding environments for residents (Cohen, 1984) and for staff members (Braxton, 1995; Whalley, 1994). Staff members deal with residents’ strong, potentially disabling emotions and need to give strategic, purposeful holding that enables the residents to express such emotions and release them to examine their experiences and develop creative, effective ways of performing their tasks (Braxton, 1995; Winnicott & Britton, 1947). The premise here is that adults who experience strong emotions often need settings in which to safely express and interpret their experiences, that is, to temporarily regress to intentionally nurturing environments.¹

This dynamic—of organization members’ needing holding environments—has been broadened from therapeutic residential institutions to other sorts of organizations (Heifetz, 1994; Shapiro & Carr, 1991). It occurs when organization members experience potentially disabling anxiety at work. It occurs among adults who generally function at reasonably high levels. And it occurs throughout organizational life, although it is not usually labeled as such. Pieces of the holding environment concept are scattered across various literatures that document holding within mentoring (Kram, 1983), leader-member exchange (Berg, 1998; Graen & Scandura, 1987), group (Bolton & Roberts, 1994; Gustafson & Cooper, 1985), coworker (Lyth, 1988; Shapiro & Carr, 1991), and consulting (Alderfer, 1980; Kahn, 1995; Stein, 1996) relationships. In their most effective moments, such relationships are temporary holding environments in which people floundering in anxiety are caught up and secured by others—calmed, appreciated, understood, helped—until they are able to regain their equilibrium and continue on their way. In this article, I describe what those moments are like, the conditions under which they are created, and the contexts that render them more or less realistic and desirable.

ENVISIONING HOLDING ENVIRONMENTS AT WORK

An employee seeks out a senior manager after a client has just upbraided her for what he perceived as her failure to provide him with services. The client represents a new business direction for the company, which the employee is developing largely on her own. The manager makes time for her at the end of day. She is upset and unable to think clearly about the situation. She tells her manager to replace her, that she just is not ready for this kind of client. He listens closely, questions her about her perceptions, feelings, and what she thinks ought to be done. He asks her why she is so upset by the situation, which leads to an in-depth conversation about an experience she had in a former job. He empathizes with her difficult situation, telling her how much he appreciates her for trying to do something so new. He offers alternative ways to understand the client’s actions. He sets up a meeting with her the next day to discuss next steps.

A group member is distracted, unable to focus on the project meeting. The project manager pauses to ask the member if she is all right. The member apologizes, tells the group that she just learned of a recently filed lawsuit against the company regarding a previous project she led. She sits silently through the rest of the meeting, her eyes downcast. The project manager wraps up the group’s work and then invites group members to remain, if they wish, to discuss the lawsuit situation. Most group members remain, and they spend a half-hour hearing about the lawsuit and the member’s concerns and anxiety. They help interpret the various signals the member has received from company officers,
provide information from their own knowledge and experiences, empathize and give emotional support, and let her know they are available for her.

Two colleagues are talking about the recent downsizing. One has just been asked to reduce his hours to 80% and fears this is a step to being let go. He says how difficult it would be for his wife and children if he lost his job. He is despondent and repeats over and over that he just cannot imagine having to look around for another job after all these years. He talks about how he cannot focus on his work and how he just lost a client through his negligence. The other colleague listens and through a series of questions helps the other understand how much he has contributed to a series of important projects and demonstrated skills that the company increasingly needs. The second member says that he too fears he will be downsized or asked to take an unappealing role and that he is distracted, making mistakes like a rookie. They each talk about feeling alone, unable to share their fear and uncertainty with others, and what a relief it is finally to do so. They discuss strategies each can use to become more visible, such as getting more involved in the company’s total quality management coordinating team.

At the weekly meeting of a cross-functional product development group, the marketer says he heard that the group’s project might lose its funding soon. A design engineer is nonchalant, saying that he has heard that ever since the project began. Some of the other members begin talking about the upcoming product show, a deadline the group is in danger of missing. The project leader asks the group to spend a few minutes talking about the funding issue. The marketer says that he has heard from a few people that the senior vice president of marketing who has been championing the project is about to resign and that his successor supports a competing product. He has tried to meet with the senior vice president but to no avail, and he has been too upset to do useful work on the project. Other members nod. They talk about how hard it has been to come to work on the project these last few weeks, ever since the rumors began and the senior vice president has all but disappeared. Group members listen carefully to one another, follow up on one another’s thoughts and feelings, and talk of how they have avoided dealing with their insecurity about the project. Led by the project leader, the group members build a picture of the current political environment, sharing information from their respective functions, until they have a plan for lining up other champions and resources to support their project.

These brief scenarios indicate the essential nature of holding environments at work. Organization members seek out or are receptive to holding environments when they are “startled,” that is, when they are confronted with work-related situations they find disturbing, upsetting, or anxiety provoking. Such situations contain what Winnicott (1960) refers to as noxious stimuli that threaten to impinge on people and destabilize them, distracting them from their tasks. People, individually or collectively, experience a crisis. The experience is primarily emotional. Internal floodgates open, and one or more strong emotions—anger, confusion, despair, fear, anxiety—rush in and sweep aside normal adult functioning, leaving workers temporarily caught like small vessels in the torrents. They are unable to focus rationally. The situations that trigger such instability vary widely across individuals and are defined by how deeply they reach the vulnerable emotional centers of people. Different situations, such as demanding clients, downsizing, and lawsuits, touch people in different ways. When they are touched so deeply that their emotional responses render them temporarily nonfunctioning, they experience the need for holding environments at work.

The anxiety triggered by a difficult situation may be located within individuals or social systems (e.g., dyads, groups, departments). The units of holding vary as well, from interpersonal (coworker, leader-subordinate) relationships to groups and teams, coalitions, and other social systems. In the first scenario above, the anxiety is located
within an individual whose manager helps create a holding environment within their dyad. In the second scenario, the anxiety is located within an individual, but the group itself serves as the holding environment. In the third scenario, the anxiety is located in each of the two colleagues who create a mutual holding environment. And in the last scenario, the anxiety is spoken of initially by one member but emerges as located within the whole group, which then creates itself as a collective holding environment. In each of these cases, organization members who experience anxiety authorize someone else, or a group, to be a holding environment. To authorize someone is to give him or her authority over oneself in the service of a task (Berg, 1998). Authorizing others to hold means empowering them as temporary caregivers, that is, permitting them to tend to oneself as one learns within an emotionally difficult situation. People thus place themselves, metaphorically, in the hands of others, retreating to them as ships retreat to safe harbors.

Holding environments are marked by a shifting of the task, through the conscious intervention of a member or leader of a dyad or group, toward holding. A manager makes time to support an upset employee. A colleague shares his fear, and another deliberately joins the conversation. The leader of one group makes time at the end to support a member, whereas the leader of another group intervenes to direct a conversation toward rather than away from the group’s anxiety. In each case, people deliberately create the psychological space in which the task becomes surfacing and working through anxiety. Although less intensive than the holding actions of mothers and analysts, holding environments at work are reasonably safe places in which people may express and examine their experiences in startling situations.

Within holding environments, people demonstrate care and concern for others in particularly skillful ways. What ideally occurs between coworkers is similar to what occurs between sophisticated adult friends when one turns to the other for support. Klein (1987) offers a useful description of adult friendship, noting that

good friends strengthen and diversify our ego-functioning: they produce speculations, explanations, and suggestions of their own for us to consider, and much else. In times of crisis they are especially important, sustaining us while we encounter and explore new things, encouraging us to carry on, holding us when we temporarily lose our footing in the stress of reorganizing our concepts. They take care of us and step in when, in the course of the temporary disorganization that new developments may bring, we are about to do something permanently detrimental to our interests. (p. 378)

Holding environments at work require similar behaviors (as discussed below) that demonstrate and go beyond the simple description of care and concern. These behaviors do not depend on people’s becoming friends, although some may. Friendship is, at its finest, open ended: People make commitments to care about one another and invest in one another’s growth with the possibility of doing so across time and space. Holding environments at work are linked more closely to work relationships, environments, and tasks. People make conditional commitments to care about one another within limits set by commitments they make to their organizations. Such limits, paradoxically, allow people to be fully present with one another within given boundaries. People can enter holding environments at work knowing that they do not need to be involved more deeply, and perhaps more inextricably, than they wish in the lives of oth-
ers. They know that holding environments are bounded, constructed for specific purposes. They know as well that holding environments are limited to issues relating to work. Nonwork issues appear. The woman’s unresolved issues about a previous job surface in a conversation with her manager, and a man tells another of his fear of losing his job and the effects on his wife and children. But unless they become friends, people intuitively limit the depth of such conversations.

Finally, holding environments result, ideally, in people’s moving forward on some task. When people are able to surface and confront that which makes them anxious, they are better able to make choices about how to proceed (Havens, 1989). It is neither likely nor desirable that holding environments will result in people’s becoming immune to the experience of anxiety. In moderation, anxiety serves useful functions. It is, at times, a valid response to a situation, serving to mobilize people to act. There are, of course, different qualities to the actions that people may take in response to anxiety. They may be mobilized to examine their situations carefully, develop alternatives to action, and choose that which is most likely to lead to an effective outcome. Or they may act in ways that have previously proven useful in defending them against anxiety but have little to do with the effective resolution of current situations. In the latter case, ideally, holding environments enable people to interrupt their instinctive defenses against anxiety and make reasoned choices about their behaviors.

**FACILITATING CONDITIONS**

Holding environments at work emerge when opportunity, desire, and competence coincide. Although these environments cannot be determined in some sort of causal formulation, a number of conditions most likely must be met in order to create and sustain them.

*Optimum range of anxiety.* People who experience little anxiety do not need holding environments, although they may require routine social support. Other situations may arouse so much anxiety that individuals are spun into psychological crises for which holding environments at work are inadequate. In such cases, individuals need to find support (e.g., therapy, crisis counseling outside work) or risk despair, isolation, and withdrawal. The optimum range of anxiety for holding environments drives individuals and groups toward support without disabling their abilities to express their thoughts, feelings, and impulses; feel affirmed; and regain perspective (see Lyth, 1988). Holding environments are disrupted when people are too anxious to allow themselves to be helped, or for groups, when shared defenses against anxiety leave members unable to focus rationally on problems and their solutions (Bion, 1961; Lyth, 1988).

*Trusting movements toward others.* Holding environments depend on individuals’ moving toward others for help. This requires trust. Trust develops over time as a matter of experience, as people find others to be trustworthy sources of support. But the paradox of trust is that it does not exist until people act as if it already does (Smith & Berg,
1987), that is, until people make themselves vulnerable to others whom they wish to consider trustworthy. Individuals vary in terms of their ability to make themselves vulnerable. Those who have been held well in their lives, particularly as children in relations with parents and other primary caregivers, develop a sense of basic trust that enables them to move toward others when they are anxious, secure in the sense that they will find support (Bowlby, 1980; Erikson, 1968). People who lack such experiences create psychological defenses that prevent them from seeking or being receptive to others, and they often become emotionally isolated at work (Kahn & Kram, 1994). Dyads and groups also vary in terms of their ability to develop trust. Some dyads and groups resolve the paradox of trust by acting as if it already exists, whereas others remain stuck in the premise that it shall never do so (Smith & Berg, 1987). The former are able to create holding environments for their members, whereas for the latter, such environments are disrupted even before they exist.

The decision to move toward others presumably involves an implicit or explicit cost-benefit analysis in which people weigh the benefits of moving toward holding against the costs of not doing so. There clearly are risks involved. People risk being perceived by others as weak, unable to take care of themselves, or too costly to support. They risk being hurt by others. These decisions are contextually shaped. Individuals who are members of particular identity (e.g., race, gender, ethnicity) and organizational (e.g., functional, hierarchical) make decisions about holding environments partly on the basis of the intergroup relationships characterizing their organizations (see Alderfer, 1987). It is more likely, for example, that people who represent minority or low-power groups in an organization will scrutinize carefully the option of creating holding environments with people representing majority or high-power groups and will more readily approach those within their own identity and organizational groups. Their decisions are based not simply on individual, interpersonal, or group factors but, quite reasonably, on embedded intergroup relationships (Alderfer, 1987).

Once people decide to move toward others, they send signals indicating that they need holding environments. These signals appear in various forms. In the first scenario above, the employee seeks out her manager and lets him know that she is upset, suggesting rather dramatically that he replace her. In the second scenario, the group member sends nonverbal signals of which she may or may not be aware: looking down and not speaking. In the third scenario, a member is clearly despondent and simply begins talking about how upset and frightened he is. And in the last scenario, the team signals anxiety to itself through the voice of one member who raises the issue, then through the leader who fastens the group’s attention, and finally to other members who join the dialogue. In such ways, people signal their needs for help in managing their anxiety.

Available, competent holding. Individuals who seek or are receptive to holding require others—coworkers, group members, leaders, mentors—who are physically and emotionally available for and competent at creating holding environments. Availability is partly a matter of happenstance, that is, whether a particular unit or department contains sympathetic others who value holding environments. It is also a matter of potential holders doing the same kind of implicit or explicit weighing of the benefits
of investing in creating holding environments versus the costs of not doing so. Holders risk investing too much time and energy in others whose capacities for work and learning are too limited and who might turn out to be overly dependent and draining of time and energy. They risk as well siphoning energy from activities for which they are explicitly rewarded. These decisions too are shaped at multiple levels of analysis: Individuals vary in their personal experiences of being held and in their subsequent abilities to hold others; relationships and groups vary in their developmental readiness to allow for holding; and embedded intergroup relations shape people’s desires to enter holding environments with others.

Once people decide to receive or move toward anxious others, they send signals indicating their availability. In the scenarios above, for example, they set up separate meetings, move toward rather than away from difficult subjects, and explicitly make time for discussing anxiety-arousing issues. They then perform three types of behaviors. Containment involves making oneself accessible, actively attending to the other, inquiring into the other’s experiences, and receiving those experiences with compassion and acceptance. Empathic acknowledgement involves curiously exploring others’ experiences, empathetically identifying with others as a source of insight, and validating others. Enabling perspective involves helping others make sense of their experiences, using self-reflection as a source of information about others, orienting others toward work task requirements, and negotiating interpretations of anxiety-arousing situations. These dimensions, delineated in Table 1, are drawn from clinical psychology (Kohut, 1977; Rogers, 1958; Winnicott, 1960), group relations theory (Bion, 1961; Shapiro & Carr, 1991), organizational psychology (Kahn, 1993), and philosophy (Noddings, 1984).

Collectively, these holding behaviors enable people to feel safely overwhelmed by events and situations. They enable people to let others take on their ego functioning while they themselves struggle with anxiety and difficult emotions (Klein, 1987; Shapiro & Carr, 1991). People allow themselves to simply be with (and at times be overwhelmed by) such emotions, knowing that they can temporarily lean on others. Metaphorically, holding environments are temporary shelters to which people, caught in storms, find their way. There, they collapse in front of a fire while others bring them warm clothes and soup, let them know they are okay and will make it, and help them figure out how they can get to where they are going. They provide, as Josselson (1992) notes, an “arms-around experience [which] is the background to the more conspicuous experiences of initiative and adventure” (p. 31).³

Competent receiving. Receivers must also be competent in particular ways. They need to be appropriately receptive without running too far away from or jumping too close to others. This requires them to solicit help when necessary (Josselson, 1992); appropriately self-disclose (Jourard, 1971); elicit and receive useful feedback through active, nondefensive listening (Rogers, 1958); and examine their own learning processes (Argyris, 1982). These behaviors, however, only help create holding environments when receivers retain a core sense of self-reliance while turning to others for support. This balance requires a degree of personal maturity and security, marked by
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<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Behaviors</th>
<th>Receiver Experiences</th>
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| Containment              | Create safe, reliable environment enabling other’s expression of strong emotions and impulses. | **Accessibility:** Remain in other’s vicinity, allowing time and space for uninterrupted contact and connection.  
**Attention:** Actively attend to other’s experiences, ideas, and expressions; show comprehension with eye contact, verbal and nonverbal gestures.  
**Inquiry:** Probe for other’s experiences, thoughts, and feelings.  
**Compassion:** Show emotional presence by displaying warmth, affection, and kindness.  
**Acceptance:** Accept other’s thoughts and feelings without judgment; bear painful affect without withdrawal; resist own impulses to react in evaluative, nonaccepting ways. | Receiver feels cared for, symbolically held, witnessed, joined, unalone, accompanied. |
| Empathic acknowledgment  | Create empathic context that affirms other’s sense of self as knowable, worthwhile, and understandable, laying the groundwork for the resumption of ego functioning. | **Curiosity:** Acknowledge other’s individuality by inquiring about and accepting other’s unique experiences of situations.  
**Empathy:** Become imaginatively engrossed in and identify with other’s experiences.  
**Validation:** Communicate positive regard, respect, and appreciation to other; reflect back and confirm other’s positive qualities. | Receiver feels valued and acknowledged through attention and curiosity; feels self-accepting through other’s acceptance and empathy. |
| Enabling perspective     | Create context in which other can recover sense of primary work task and reengage ego functioning on behalf of that task; involves separating others from their emotional experiences and creating space for rational thought and action. | **Sensemaking:** Help other make sense of experiences and situations through focus on individual and contextual factors.  
**Self-reflection:** Use own experiences about other and situation as useful data.  
**Task focusing:** Help other focus on controllable elements of situation and the primary task rather than on unproductive, anxiety- arousing elements.  
**Negotiated interpretation:** Help other develop actionable interpretations of situations and experiences based on critical thinking about tasks. | Receiver feels less bound up emotionally, less anxiety, and more accepting of self in relation to situation; has clearer understanding of personal and contextual factors; is reoriented toward task; and has more capacity for self-regulated, competent thought and action. |
people's retaining a sense of themselves and their roles when faced with their own anxieties, desires, and personal defenses (Havens, 1989). It requires, in other words, the ability to manage the paradox of holding onto oneself while being held by others (Smith & Berg, 1987). Disruptions occur when receivers become overly dependent on (i.e., too close to) or counterdependent on (i.e., too distant from) potential holders (Kahn & Kram, 1994).

**Resilient boundaries.** Dyads and groups must form and maintain temporarily impermeable boundaries that enable holding to occur. Boundaries in social systems are sustained by movements toward those within the boundary and by movements away from those outside the boundary (see Schneider, 1991). Holding environments at work form when people are temporarily bound together by the joint work of containment, empathic acknowledgment, and enabling perspective. Such work is sustained by people's pushing away other roles and tasks in order to focus on the holding process. Phones are not answered; computers are not glanced at; papers are not shuffled; other topics are not randomly introduced. Optimal boundaries enable safety (Alderfer, 1980; Schneider, 1991). People are more likely to feel safe enough to share their thoughts, feelings, and impulses when it is clear that the holder (or holders) and the receiver (or receivers) are bound together by the holding task (Modell, 1976; Rogers, 1958). The boundaries that sustain holding environments at work must be resilient enough to withstand potential disruptions from others.

**Positive experience and outcomes.** Holding environments that create positive experiences and outcomes for all participants are likely to be sustained over time and across situations. The positive experience of being held is the “arms-around” experience described by Josselson (1992). The positive experience of holding is the pleasure and meaning of helping others find their ways, of caring for and regenerating others during difficult moments, of being, above all, used well in the service of others' growth (Noddings, 1984; Rogers, 1958). People help others move further along the paths of dealing with anxiety-arousing situations by helping them clear away the underbrush of troubling emotions, by affirming their sense of themselves as competent, and by helping them see and engage their next steps more clearly. As a result, receivers may (re)acquire the capacity to work undiminished by anxiety.

The repeated success of holding environments creates further success. People figure out how to come together in ways that allow one to help and the other to be helped and how to move away from one another in ways that allow them to remain autonomous and appropriately connected. This developmental process follows the same sort of sequences that characterize the maturing of work (Gabarro, 1987), mentoring (Kram, 1983), or group relationships (McCollom, 1990): a more or less steady progression toward intimacy marked by the resolution of issues involving disclosure, trust, conflict, and commitment. When such development occurs, people get quicker and better at engaging the joint actions of holding and receiving.
FAILURES OF HOLDING ENVIRONMENTS

Holding environments at work occur in rare pockets of organizational life where people in trusting relationships or close-knit groups come together to give and receive help in situations marked by anxiety. More often than not, people fail to create these environments. They move past one another too hurriedly or interact too perfunctorily. They do not consider asking for or providing holding. They hold their own interests so centrally that they have too little capacity to hold those of others. They begin to move toward one another but are pulled away by competing demands. They rush too hurriedly toward one another, creating a false and cloying intimacy that cannot sustain itself. Holding environments are fragile. They can be halted or destroyed with the slightest hint that someone is not available emotionally or cannot be trusted. They are constructed through a finely calibrated set of signals, mostly transmitted below the level of conscious awareness, in tones and gestures and eye contact. The process can fail at the slightest tremor of one’s movement away from another.

Points of vulnerability. Each of the facilitating conditions described above carries with it a point of vulnerability at which a holding environment can fail (see Table 2). The first three points listed in Table 2 prevent the initial construction of a holding environment. Anxiety-provoking situations may be so overwhelming that they trigger defenses (e.g., procrastination, paralysis, instinctive action) that push people away from holding environments. Or individuals cannot allow themselves to trust others, based on attachment relations that have proven wounding in early life. Organization members also may fear the perceived costs associated with holding interactions. There may also be no others physically or psychologically available to serve as holders. Any of these conditions undermine the possibility of organization members’ beginning to construct a holding environment.

Holding environments also can fail after they are initiated. Holders may be unable to perform holding behaviors. They may violate receivers’ boundaries, pressing too tightly or quickly for personal information, making projections about them based on little data, or using the relationship to meet their own needs for control, sexuality, or power—intrusions of the sort that occasionally occur in therapeutic, educational, ministry, and other help-seeking situations (Havens, 1989; Rogers, 1958). They may turn away from receivers, ignoring what they say or feel and absenting themselves emotionally. This is abandonment rather than intrusion but with the same effect: The receiver is dropped rather than held. Within groups, this may appear as scapegoating. An individual raises an issue that has significance for the whole group, but other members act as if the issue belongs only to the individual (Smith & Berg, 1987). This locates the collective anxiety within the individual, who is abandoned by others, disrupting the shared holding environment (Shapiro & Carr, 1991). A second failure is when receivers are unable to stay in appropriate relation with holders. A third failure is when holders and receivers are unable to maintain a boundary around their interaction that withstands the pulls away from one another.
TABLE 2
Points of Failure in Holding Environments

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<tr>
<th>Source of Failure</th>
<th>Nature of Failure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overwhelming situations</td>
<td>People experience overwhelming anxiety, fear, or other emotions that disable their capacities to seek or receive support.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inability to move trustingly toward potential holders</td>
<td>People sense higher costs than benefits from holding or innately distrust holding environments and institute psychological defenses against authorizing others as holders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of potential holding</td>
<td>Others are physically or emotionally unavailable to serve as holders by dint of temperament, situation, or the sensing of higher costs than benefits from creating holding environments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of holding competence</td>
<td>Abandonment or intrusions through failed acts of holding that create inappropriate distance from or closeness to receiver, resulting in loss of appropriate roles, tasks, and boundaries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of receiving competence</td>
<td>Receiver’s inability to maintain mature dependency, moving so close to or far away from holders as to lose appropriate roles, tasks, and boundaries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of temporarily impermeable boundaries around dyadic or group holding environment</td>
<td>Holder and receiver unable to focus deeply enough on work of containment, empathic acknowledgement, and enabling perspective to hold at bay competing roles, tasks, and pressures from others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of positive experiences and outcomes for all participants of holding environments</td>
<td>Those experiencing anxiety do not feel cared for and helped toward self-regulated, competent thought and action; holders do not experience themselves as useful and competent in helping others. Receivers’ capacities for working through anxiety are not enlarged.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These failures result in holding interactions that are disrupted to the point that they do not satisfy people’s needs. The disruptions are of a piece: Each represents the loss of appropriate tasks, roles, and boundaries that jointly create the psychological space of holding environments at work (see Shapiro & Carr, 1991). That space exists only to the extent that people hold onto their roles as managers and subordinates, colleagues, or coworkers rather than let them go and sustain illusions that they are something else altogether (e.g., therapist-patient). They remain focused on the tasks of support and enabling job performance. And they respect the boundaries that separate them from one another, avoiding inappropriately personal intrusions and respecting people’s needs to self-disclose within reasonable limits.

* Mature dependence. Staying firmly within given roles, tasks, and boundaries is difficult for both holder and receiver. This difficulty is related to the almost paradoxical nature of mature dependency, which requires people to assume the temporary roles of caregiver and receiver while remaining adults (Klein, 1987). The internal models that people have of caregiving usually derive from parent-child relations, in which caregivers are relatively omnipotent and receivers relatively helpless (Bowlby, 1980). When people feel confused, helpless, or upset at work and seek out others for emotional support at work, parent-child models of dependency may be triggered for both
caregiver and receiver. This is particularly true when the holding relationship is mapped onto formal authority relations between supervisors and subordinates. Mature dependence may depend on how authority plays out in any particular hierarchical relationship, that is, the extent to which the authority of the supervisor is primary and immovable or is worn lightly, able to coexist with caregiving and care receiving. There is a systemic influence here as well. Organizations vary in their norms about hierarchical relationships. Mature dependence may be more or less possible in different organizations, depending on the extent to which members are routinely infantalized by the use of authority in hierarchical relationships.

The struggle that people must wage, internally and externally, is to hang onto their roles, tasks, and boundaries while being pulled to enact parent-child roles. When people lose this struggle, they may tumble into inappropriately dependent relations that undermine their work. Those being held may become overly dependent and lose the capacity for self-regulated thought and action. Those offering holding may become overly controlling and lose sight of the task of developing others’ capacities. They create codependence. Such relationships are more aptly described as clinging environments, which prevent individuals from separating from those to whom they turn for help. Mature dependence requires both holder and held to remain adults in the process of giving and receiving relatively intensive support (Havens, 1989; Rogers, 1958).

**HOLDING ENVIRONMENTS IN CONTEXT**

Holding environments were initially conceptualized in the relatively stable contexts of parent-child and psychoanalytic relationships. It is a different matter to create these environments between adults whose work is fast paced and whose time and energies are scarce and in organizations marked by frequent turnover, downsizing, or other major transitions. When such conditions pull people away from supporting one another, the creation of holding environments may represent acts of courage, folly, desperation, or faith. On the other hand, it is precisely in such circumstances that holding environments are most useful to work through potentially debilitating anxiety. This is part of the paradox raised earlier: When holding environments are most needed, they are often the most difficult to create and sustain. The question is, To what extent are these environments possible, or desirable, in the context of current organizations?

**The Limits of Possibility**

As noted throughout this article, constructing and maintaining holding environments at work require people to intentionally commit to doing so. The traditional psychological contract bound individuals and their organizations, creating a context for such commitments and investments. Such a context no longer exists, at least in force. Organizations and individuals act as if everyone were a free agent. The social fabric in organizations is weaker, with people less bound to others whom they perceive as temporary coworkers. Without an assumption of continued relationships, and with their self-interest (often defined monetarily) paramount, people are less willing to invest in
relationships. The boundaries around organizations have become more porous, less able to hold their members, who become less willing to hold one another.

Other contexts are also crucial. Although successful holding environments may seem to depend mostly on individual skills (of giving and receiving care) and interpersonal dynamics (related to relationship development), the reality is more complicated. Group, intergroup, and organizational contexts shape and constrain their effectiveness.

Group dynamics. Groups develop norms that shape members’ behaviors (Hackman, 1987). One such norm, presumably, shapes the extent to which holding behaviors are encouraged or discouraged among members or, more generally, the extent to which members are allowed to be appropriately authentic, present, and self-disclosing with one another (Kahn, 1992). Individuals’ choices about whether to create holding environments at work may thus be shaped, powerfully so, by the extent to which they feel they even make choices about such matters. They simply do not create holding environments, or they simply do, because that is what members of their groups do.

Two types of interrelated dynamics may be in effect when groups are unable to sustain themselves as holding environments. First, groups may not have developed. Group development is marked by the creation of optimal boundaries and the capacity to deal effectively with paradoxes, enabling members to join around the task of managing anxiety (McCollom, 1990; Smith & Berg, 1987). Second, groups may erect defenses—what Bion (1961) called basic assumptions—against anxiety that depend on their members’ avoidance of authentic work relationships. In some groups, for example, members may experience a great deal of anxiety about a situation—an incompetent leader, say, or an impossible task—and create collective defense mechanisms. They create, for example, a division in the group that lets them act as if the real issue is their conflict with one another rather than with their leader or organization. The division in the group maintains the defense against anxiety seemingly too difficult to acknowledge. Any attempts to create a holding environment in the group as a whole are resisted as an assault on the shared defense against anxiety (see Bion, 1961; Smith & Berg, 1987).

Intergroup relations. Individuals are embedded within relationships between the identity and organizational groups to which they belong. Embedded intergroup relations theory (Alderfer, 1980, 1987) notes that when individuals interact they represent to one another their identity and organizational groups. Their interactions are shaped by the boundaries, power differences, affective patterns, cognitive formations, and leadership behavior that mark relations between their groups (Alderfer, 1987). These relations shape the extent to which holding environments can exist between members who represent different groups. In an organization where power is predominantly in the hands of whites, it is likely to be more difficult for cross-race or cross-ethnic pairs and groups to create holding environments (Thomas & Alderfer, 1989). In an organization characterized by strained labor-management relations, it is likely to be more difficult for a supervisory relationship or a task force containing representatives of these groups to create holding environments. In such situations, people will face prob-
lems in creating boundaries around their interactions impermeable enough to withstand disruptions posed by the intergroup relations in which they are embedded.

Organizational dynamics. Like groups, organizations develop norms to answer questions about how openness and intimacy are to be handled at work (Schein, 1985). Organizational norms may legitimize the solicitation and expression of care, assign certain values to relational work generally (Fletcher, 1999), and influence how available people are to seek, receive, or provide emotional support (Kahn, 1993). Such norms may implicitly prohibit holding environments in certain situations, such as a threatened hostile takeover, but encourage them in the ordinary scheme of work. Ideally, this encouragement is built into formal and informal reward systems that reinforce members partly for their ability to develop others (e.g., developing successors, creating team leaders). Sustaining these norms also is a matter of leaders’ personally and symbolically displaying their support for the holding process (cf. Schein, 1985).

Organizations also develop defenses against anxiety—what Lyth (1988) terms social defenses—that operate, on a larger scale, similar to group-level basic assumptions. Although some institutional defenses are healthy, enabling people to cope with stress and perform their work, social defenses can obstruct contact with reality, create casualties, and undermine work and learning (Halton, 1994). They operate primarily in terms of denial—pushing away anxiety-provoking thoughts, feelings, and experiences from conscious awareness. In one case, for example, a consulting firm was unable to develop a marketing strategy to keep it afloat as it shifted from one type of client to another (Kahn, 1998). The leaders and members of the firm were unable to discuss the difficult situation, and in order to defend against the anxiety it generated about the survival of the firm, they created a different crisis on which they were able to focus instead. Attempts to construct holding environments were resisted as threats to a social defense marked by denial of the original source of anxiety. Social defenses are resistant to the type of interruptions posed by relationships such as those represented in holding environments (Lyth, 1988).

Questions of Desirability

Aside from the question of how realistic the holding environment concept is in given organizational contexts are psychological and moral questions about its desirability. The psychological question involves the issue of pain. When holding environments consistently fail, they may leave people feeling abandoned or intruded upon, locked in codependent or conformity-based relationships, or without the support to act effectively amid anxiety. These failures produce painful experiences that likely weaken people’s desires for future holding environments. Successful holding environments also may cause pain, as they help interrupt defenses that allow people to avoid anxiety associated with painful tasks, issues of power and competition, threatening transitions, and the like (Bion, 1961; Lyth, 1988). Such interruptions surface original anxieties plus those associated with dismantling and re-creating patterns of behavior, releasing varying amounts of pain within people and systems.
The moral question involves the issue of collusion. Although holding environments enable people's growth amid anxiety, they also may create pockets of protection in which people compensate for what they do not receive in organizations marked by isolation, mistrust, and withholding. Such protection may be quite necessary, particularly for those representing less powerful identity and organizational groups. But holding environments among peers cannot substitute for dysfunctional authority relations, just as those among racial minority group members cannot substitute for dysfunctional intergroup relations. In such cases, to suggest that dysfunctional group, intergroup, and organizational dynamics may be changed through holding environments is to risk colluding with such dysfunction. In inhumane conditions, holding environments may be practically necessary for struggling individuals but morally undesirable to the extent that they bind people to and seemingly make palatable punishing situations. Ideally, organizations would reduce the extent to which they make members vulnerable to anxiety, and holding environments would be less crucial. As a step toward that, what people do within holding environments may enable them to become clearer about dysfunctional contexts and the possibilities for their change.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I am suggesting that just beneath observable work environments—people designing products, meeting, talking on the phone—lie safety nets, in the form of less observable holding environments, that enable organization members to be relatively self-reliant in navigating situations they experience as uncertain, chaotic, and confusing. These latter environments are just as real for organization members, though often less discussable. They are intentional in that members quite deliberately shift into the psychological space where other roles and tasks that link them are temporarily put aside in order to do the work of managing anxiety. As a source of security, holding environments potentially are quite powerful, anchoring people in the midst of situations they experience as troubling. They also are increasingly necessary, as organizations require their members to rely more on themselves.

Holding environments clearly are quite difficult to construct. Group, intergroup, and organizational contexts may make them unrealistic or undesirable. People also wish for places of support but fear a Pandora's box of messy emotions and difficult situations, where they may experience an anxiety against which they have defended. This is a reasonable fear. Moving past it requires individuals to have enough pain, courage, or basic trust to approach holding environments. Leadership is also crucial. Leaders can, personally and symbolically, use their authority to create safe-enough places for holding to occur. But this requires them to have the insight to understand how patterns of organizational behavior protect them and their systems from anxiety at the expense of system effectiveness. Such insight might well come from researchers who examine how change agents—organizational leaders, consultants, and others—struggle to intervene in group, intergroup, and organizational dynamics in order to create the conditions that facilitate holding environment relationships and settings.
NOTES

1. This premise is the key to the argument on the importance of holding environments. More fully stated, the premise is that “regression is a defense common to all of us. At times of stress, when our mature capacities cannot manage, we all have the capacity to shift back toward the use of psychological mechanisms more appropriate to earlier periods of our lives” (Shapiro & Carr, 1991, p. 36). This premise is not shared by those who believe that adulthood is defined by the absence of regression—by the constant use of rational thought to hold at bay wishes, needs, fears, fantasies, and other emotionally laden phenomena that are the stuff of regression. That is a different premise. It leads people to consider those who experience potentially destabilizing anxiety and seek help as less than adult in their functioning. And it leads people to dismiss the need, in themselves and in others, for holding environments.

2. Subordinates are not appropriate sources of holding. Although it is often the case that hierarchical superiors depend, consciously or not, on their subordinates for intermittent or constant emotional support, doing so is potentially damaging for both. When subordinates are cast in the role of emotional support for their bosses, the former risk losing the appropriate authority boundaries that allow them to bring pressing issues, problems, and concerns to those bosses (Hirschhorn, 1990). Subordinates thus withhold important information, not wishing to burden superiors whom they perceive as overwhelmed or not trusting those superiors to provide adequate support (see Miller, 1981, regarding “gifted children”). Such withholding is often detrimental to subordinates’ task performances and, more generally, to their growth and development at work (Kahn, 1993). The superiors themselves run risks as well, for when they turn to subordinates for constant emotional support, they may turn away from superiors and peers who form valuable networks through which to receive information, resources, and political help. They then become less able to facilitate their work and that of those they represent.

3. The physical holding of the infant thus becomes the social support of the temporarily destabilized worker. The holding is, of course, symbolic rather than physical and, as such, is more complex. As Josselson (1992) notes, “The holding experience is a complicated one to understand, because it is neither cognitively realistic nor emotionally intelligible. The sense of holding exists between fantasy and reality: we feel held even though we know that we are not. We rely on people even though we know that they cannot promise us safety” (p. 34).

4. The sense of basic distrust corresponds to the insecure patterns of attachment identified by Bowlby (1980). He identified three patterns. Secure people perceive others as available, responsive, and helpful and thus are able to be independent and ask for help as necessary. Bowlby identified two types of insecure patterns. Anxious resistant people are uncertain whether others will be available, responsive, or helpful and thus tend to cling to potential sources of help. Anxious avoidant people have no confidence that others will be helpful and they expect rejection; thus, they tend to become emotionally self-sufficient and withdraw from others. These patterns are maintained by internalized models that generally operate out of awareness and resist change (Bowlby, 1980; Weiss, 1982). Unless people become aware of their models through feedback and have different experiences in their postchildhood attachments (e.g., with friends, lovers, therapists, teachers, coworkers), their childhood-derived patterns will continue to shape their relationships (Greenspan & Lieberman, 1988).

REFERENCES


