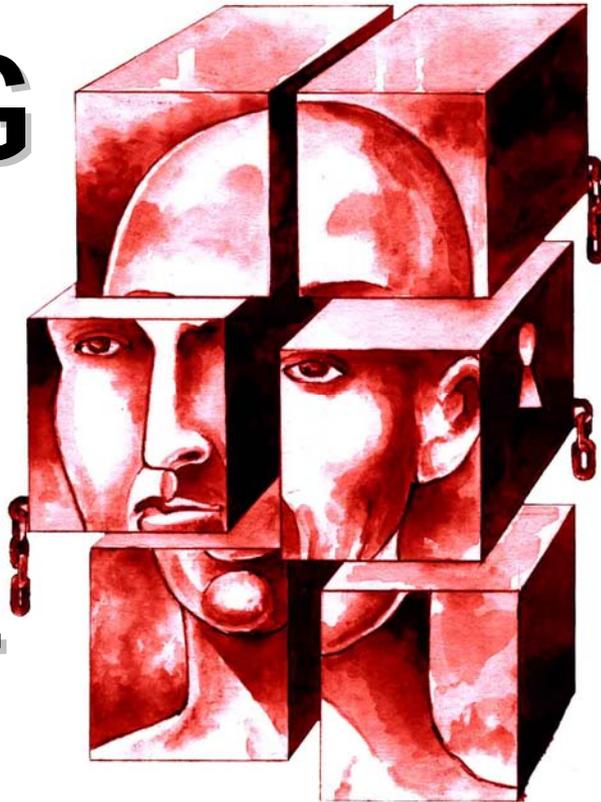


# WINNING THE WAR AGAINST FRAGMENTATION:



## Working Smarter In Troubled Times

*As we go about "business as usual" in the face of unsettling world events, keep in mind that we have many emotions that are vital to who we are and, therefore, vital to what we bring to our work.*

By Joseph D. Johnson

*Illustration by William Campbell*

© 2003 The Telein Group, Inc.

The Telein Group, Inc. • teleinhq@telein.com • www.telein.com • 001-714-952-4444

Telein  
Vision Integration Abundance

## As we go about our work

today, we do so in a time of great turmoil – the reality of being at war, following on the heels of September 11, its aftermath, Anthrax scares, corporate malfeasance, beltline snipers and the Columbia shuttle disaster. All of this has caused me to reflect on an event from my past that illustrates what I've learned about how to work effectively in the face of life's endless distractions and the importance of "checking" our emotional baggage instead of quietly carrying it with us.

The date was January 28, 1986. I was employed as a vice president of personnel for a Fortune 100 company. Driving to work one morning to attend a very important meeting with other company vice presidents, I was listening to a live radio report of the Challenger space shuttle launch in Florida. I listened to the countdown and the launch. I listened as, less than a minute later, horror came over the broadcaster's voice as he witnessed and reported the explosion that took the lives of all seven crew members that morning.

In shock, I proceeded to my meeting, not wanting to be late – starting on time was important in our efficient, yet highly unproductive environment. We chatted briefly – a few thoughts, no feelings – about the explosion that had occurred barely half an hour earlier. We then started our meeting, believing we couldn't afford to lose time on anything not related directly to our agenda. We believed we could separate this horrific event from the task at hand and, furthermore, that we could separate the part of ourselves that was struggling to deal with this tragedy from the part that was there to "do work."

So on we went – to have absolutely the most fragmented, inefficient and highly unproductive meeting we had ever had.

Several years later, I started a firm dedicated to helping individuals and groups increase their effectiveness at work. Two foundational principles undergird everything we do. The first is that individuals and groups that visualize, plan and practice *integration* – not separation – in all their work will increase their effectiveness immeasurably. The second principle is that change and growth in organizations comes through *shared meaning*, which can only result when effective dialogue has taken place. Further, we hold that effective dialogue can only take place when we allow and encourage a culture of wholeness and integration. – a culture where there is an "every day and every way" respect for the integration of life and work; of thoughts and feelings; of who we are with how we fulfill our purpose in the workplace, of our soul and spirit with our thoughts and actions at work.

One of the tools we use is called "checking-in" both before and during business meetings. The purpose is to facilitate *integrating* rather than *separating* or *fragmenting* our work and non-work lives. We believe – and our experience verifies – that each of us moves ahead more effectively if our "baggage" has been properly "checked."

Checking-in, as we practice and teach it, is deceptively simple. At the start of a meeting, the first step is to give each person, one by one, the opportunity to express anything they feel they need or want to, in order to be able to effectively move forward with their work. A person may share a happy event that took place in their life last night. They may express their frustration at this morning's traffic or their difficulty in getting a child off to school this morning. They may want to say they feel rotten because they're coming down with a cold.

Some of these things may seem trivial, unproductive, and even counter to conventional “efficient” workplace practices. To the contrary, however, checking-in gives us an opportunity to integrate our whole self with our work. The simple act of acknowledging a positive or negative “distraction” allows us to focus better on our work. Not intended as a therapy session or to solicit advice, checking-in allows us to acknowledge other aspects of our lives that may be weighing on our mind. In addition, it alerts co-workers to our possible distractions.

Checking-in can and should take place at meetings of any size – whether an informal gathering of two or three people, or (as we have done) at a meeting of close to four thousand people. In larger meetings, check-in can take place in smaller groups, for example, at each table or work group. The important thing is that check-in allows you to feel valued and acknowledged as a whole person.

Time and again, in organizations of all sizes and cultures, we have seen the transforming results of this simple yet empowering practice. A particularly poignant and positive example that contrasts with my experience that day in 1986 was my experience on the day of the more recent Columbia shuttle tragedy.

We were in Florida, in the middle of a meeting with a client organization, with a hundred or so people working in groups, when the meeting leader was informed of the shuttle crash. The leader announced the disturbing news to everyone and indicated that, as more information became available, he would share it. He encouraged people to “check in” their reactions, thoughts and fears at their tables until they felt prepared to continue with their work. The room was abuzz for about five minutes and eventually became quiet as people continued with their

work. The distressing news that could have derailed the meeting was, instead, integrated into the meeting as people were able to process the information at their own rate, articulate and relieve their stress and then proceed effectively with their work.

Organizations and individuals looking to improve workplace performance and contribute to employee well-being can benefit from adopting this simple tool. A process of check-in must be part and parcel of “how we work around here,” if we expect intellectually, emotionally, physically and spiritually whole people to think and work productively.

That 1986 meeting of vice presidents was indicative of the organizational culture of fragmentation, which holds that life and work can successfully be separated. Fragmentation contends that displays of feelings and emotions get us off-track and prevent efficiency. That common mode of thinking continues to this day to create fragmented results.

Now more than ever, with our country at war, we need to be mindful of expressing and processing our thoughts and emotions. As we strive to keep a sense of normalcy in the face of unsettling events, we can benefit from an environment that enables checking-in – the expression of what’s on our minds and how we’re feeling. Remember that, before we can create a world that is stronger and more unified, we must first ensure that we, as individuals and as a workforce, are integrated, whole, and healthy.

Be guided and encouraged by an axiom we often use at Telein and in which we firmly believe: “For the fastest and best results, go slow.”

*Joseph D. Johnson is founder and president, CEO of The Telein Group, Inc. and can be reached at (714) 952-4444 or by e-mail at teleinhq@telein.com.*