Attempting to lead without any knowledge of group and institutional process is, in my view, equivalent to attempting to cross the Sahara without a compass or a map. With great luck it is possible, but definitely not the best way of going about things. Yet it is not uncommon for leaders to have very little training or awareness about group and institutional forces in everyday working life, but nevertheless to be at the helm of vast and influential organizations.

This is something of a puzzle when group processes clearly have enormous influence over work outcomes. With awareness, they can be harnessed to drive excellent organizational results, but when they are ignored, the results can be disastrous for both the individual and the workplace.

The answer to this blindness probably lies in our early roots as individuals. From birth, we negotiate the psychological and social pathways of kindergarten, school, further education, and work as individuals. In a way this makes complete sense, and so it should. But it ignores one crucial fact—that from the moment we are born, and for that matter even when we are in utero, we are and always will be members of a group. Being a group member is not a conscious, voluntary activity or decision, it is a given. Even a hermit is a member of a group, albeit the member that rejects the group—you cannot be a hermit if the group does not exist. We may consciously opt in or out of a variety of groups, social clubs, political parties, and so on, but there are other groupings of which we are an inevitable and constant member, for example family, neighborhood, and, in the context of this book, workplace. There is no opting out of the group process inherent in the workplace. To a limited degree, individuals have a conscious capacity to decide how and whether they
relate to others at work, but at an unconscious group level they will inevitably have an effect on, and be affected by, the group psychology and ecology in which they operate.

This perspective goes against the grain of our usual thinking, namely that we function principally as individuals and that the group or workplace is nothing more than a collection of individuals. It is reassuring, however, to believe that a group is only a collection of individuals and that we, as individuals, are wholly and competently in charge of ourselves. Therefore there is no risk of loss of self-control, or of falling into states of mind that we do not understand. We can reassure ourselves that everything is under control—but in fact very often the opposite is true, as anyone reflecting on their behavior at a Saturday night party might realize the morning after the night before. The same dynamic can also occur when we review our behavior following, say, a conflicted-ridden board meeting.

Turning a blind eye to group processes and our own behavior when caught up in such processes is understandable if we do not want to face the anxiety of a new group dynamic in our personal lives, but when it comes to group dynamic processes in the workplace, it is quite a different matter. Here, awareness of group processes, whatever role we play in the organization, can be a matter of life and death. Succumbing to psychologically toxic processes at work can lead to burnout, illness, and, in extreme cases, suicide or early death. Group processes writ large across the organization can seriously damage the morale, wellbeing, success, and profitability of the organization.

This chapter addresses a number of conscious and unconscious group processes, how they influence and endanger individual and group effectiveness, and, most importantly, what can be done to minimize their negative effect and maximize the possibility of harnessing them in a constructive way. It explores the position of the executive coach, educator, or consultant to recognize group processes for what they are, while at the same time remaining adequately detached, so as to be able to observe, to think, and to link the observations with experience drawn from other fields. This in turn enables the coach, educator, or consultant to provide feedback aimed at encouraging insight and growth in the client and development in the organization.

The Individual and the Group

The basic question is not whether there is such a phenomenon as a group process, but more accurately, whether there is such a thing as an individual