

TELE-TRONIC

THE ELECTRONIC BULLETIN FROM THE BPA



USING CREATIVE ACTION METHODS TO WORK THROUGH UNION AND MANAGEMENT CONFLICT

by T.T.Srinath Ph.d.

I was invited by a division of a large Indian business conglomerate to support them, as they wished to work through a relationship challenge that was evident on the shopfloor of one of their manufacturing facilities. This facility had been created about twelve years before, while the organization itself had been in existence in India for over 100 years, with manufacturing facilities in several different locations. The one in question was created with the avowed intent of employing highly-skilled and educated persons, who would then help the current senior management work towards dismantling out-of-date levels and hierarchies: these had, up to this point, been a part of the legacy inherited from former management teams and older practices.

I asked to meet individually with each Union representative (numbering nine persons) and with each Management representative, those who dealt with the Union directly (numbering twelve). I sought a half-hour meeting with each one, so as to listen to them first, before designing an intervention and also to attempt to build rapport. In these meetings, I asked each person to share what they believed was the reality of the environment they worked in. Based on the data they provided, I sensed that the issue was primarily about open and free communication.

I agreed to hold a half-day workshop as soon as possible after completing these conversations and invited the nine Union members and twelve Management representatives to participate.

I commenced the workshop with playing music, a film song, in a language all of them spoke, the lyrics of which spoke about relationships. After listening to the song, I invited them to share any feelings they were experiencing. The collective response was that 'relationships are important and they have to be worked through'.

I then invited the participants to stand in a circle and, placing a white cloth in the middle, invited them to get in touch, first individually and silently, with what they, in the here-and-now, imagined was their challenge in relating with one another at work.

After a couple of minutes, I invited those who felt a compelling need to share, to step close to the white cloth.

Three people came forward.

I asked each one to briefly give their thoughts a voice and, once each of them had shared, I invited the rest of the group to stand behind the person whose thoughts, in the moment, they resonated with. The majority stood behind the person who said 'we are completely misaligned'.

After they returned to their seats, I introduced the 'spectrogram' by creating an imaginary diagonal line, with one end being 'we are completely aligned' and the other end being 'we are completely misaligned'. I invited the participants to stand facing me on the line, at a point they individually perceived the group to be existing, in the here-and-now.



All 21 participants stood on the imaginary line with a few bunching up at 'we are completely misaligned' and the others spreading themselves out more or less evenly.

I then invited each person to voice their thoughts and I modelled doubling, encouraging them to do so too. The exercise revealed gaps in their appreciation of each other and the actual situation: doubling helped them to experience and share their empathy for one another. Once sharing was complete, we broke for a tea break. During this time, I noticed that Union and Management representatives were actively engaged in deep conversations.

Returning from tea, I pasted plain charts or poster papers on the wall and, providing them with a variety of coloured sketch pens, invited them to, without using words, draw and colour a picture of the organization as they saw it. The group got together and painted a huge banyan tree using predominantly the colours green and blue and included also a rising sun, using orange and red.

When the task was complete, I invited them to sit facing the painting and share what they 'saw' not what they 'thought.' My hypothesis was that 'what they see will surely be different from how they think'. As though to validate my hypothesis each of them said, briefly: "We see a Banyan tree, lush and fresh; we also see a rising Sun."

Intuitively, I placed a chair in front of them and placed on it a mobile phone with a black cover. I asked each one of them to say out loud 'what they saw?' Again, each one of them described the chair on which was placed a mobile phone with a black cover.

I then nudged them to talk about the painting experience and compare it with the spectrogram. Most agreed that they all 'saw the same thing' yet when they were not 'seeing' but imagining, they tended to assume things differently.

The conversation then dwelt on making a conscious effort to, 'going forward', present visible data where there is little scope for assumptions and talk, with data that is visible and irrefutable.

The session concluded with the group genuinely wanting to re-establish lost connections between them.



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