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A new approach to visioning

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We must embrace 'Presencing' as a way of keeping us alive in the moment to possibilities that show up and the vast buffet that life is offering us to choose from.

I was invited by a well-wisher to join his team of senior managers as they attempted to craft a vision for their organisation, which being a start up, was in a business space, new, novel and untried hitherto.

On his invitation we met, the eight colleagues, he and I.

While he was designated Managing Director, he chose to see himself as first among



equals, for each of those who constituted what he termed 'the core team and torchbearers', all having several years of experience in senior, decision making positions

in their earlier organisation, in his opinion, had been cherry picked to saddle their current assignments.

Experiment that went awry

As an experiment he suggested that we start from where the team sees itself now, before embarking on the 'visioning exercise.'

To encourage an outpouring of each person's creativity we conceived an exercise that would require each member of the team to use a chart sheet, colourful yet old magazines, sketch pens, scissors and glue sticks to create, as individuals, a visual of where and how each person saw or experienced the organisation as it currently was.

Each person thereafter created a collage of his understanding of where the organisation was at present and the ensemble of charts were pasted on the wall, alongside each other.

Each person then explained his creation and the group was invited not to question but only seek clarification.

As the descriptions of the charts began to unfold, a sense of unease seemed to be prevailing in the room.

Instead of seeking clarification, which was the avowed intent, the charts began to generate controversy.

Agreement was almost absent and in its place was vociferous disagreement.

Some had created a wish list, while some others struggled to communicate 'where we are'.

Listening to each of them sharing revealed, more than the content, of what is a process of unconscionable anxiety.

Each person seemed to be gripped in some kind of vice of lack of sureness.

Gibran's teachings

While the exercise concluded without resolution, I left the venue with a nagging sense of incompleteness and thought that each person may be struggling with what is nowadays being bandied about, VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous). I may have misjudged the lack of sureness as I might have been projecting my lack of sureness with what was happening onto the group yet with little doubt I was confident that the atmosphere in the room was thick with uncertainty and low tolerance of ambiguity.

When I was departing I chanced to meet one of the members from the group and he causally told me "I cannot predict what will happen tomorrow as everything around me is changing at a pace I am finding it difficult to cope with, how can I then say where we are today? What is even more worrying", he continued, "is my inability to commit to a future I may not even be part of."

Kahlil Gibran, the famous Lebanese writer says in his book 'The Prophet,' 'do not attempt to live your child's life for he/she belongs to a future you will or may not be a part of.'

The gentleman was expressing, I reckon, a sentiment which many of us are witnessing today.

As I was expected to share my perception of the effort attempted I began to ruminate and explore within myself 'what was it about the experience and exercise that left me with a sense of incompleteness.'

My brief training in various psychological approaches to organisational development helped me examine different options that we could have worked through.

The presence and absence

What stood out however was what eminent practitioners of organisational development now call 'presence' and in this case it's absence.

What is 'presence' and what role does it play in organisational development? The word 'presence' used with delicacy by scholars such as Peter Senge, an American systems scientist and Otto Scharmer, a Senior Lecturer at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, defines the word 'presence' in many ways yet the sub-text or the deeper meaning is 'energetic availability and fluid responsiveness.'

'Presence' as I have understood and experienced in facilitating human interaction within organisations is primarily an enquiry into the lived experience of, in the case of the above organisation, the team that sat together to talk about their future. Given the belief of rapidity and continuous change enveloping the organisation and thus impacting members in it, the process of conversation could not be preempted or outcomes predefined. 'Presence' therefore required that we work with what is emerging, for it would have helped us view reality as emerging and evolving.

In grappling with turbulence that managers are constantly experiencing yet the need for each manager to meaningfully make of what is happening, allowing and being receptive to emerging data and information is the fundamental aspect of understanding human experience and participation in working towards a task.

In another assignment, where the monthly review process embarked upon the CFO to discuss the financial results for the previous quarter I noticed that each person who listened to the CFO as he shared data, was attempting to configure and make meaning of the information that was being presented in their own particular way. This was evident from, lack of seeking clarification by those who were unsure, yet fidgeting and visibly showing signs of discomfort and the evident silence by those who thought they were being targeted when the metrics of performance was being shared. I recognised that the process of including all those who were sitting in the room, some on the periphery, some with fear, would require dialogue to unravel the various interpretations present as well as create willingness from individuals to shift or alter their understanding of reality.

Non-organised conversations, which are free flowing help to co-create change which actually emerges in the moment and cannot be anticipated or planned for. In allowing

non-organised conversation to encourage participation, the driver becomes the ability to respond to the needs being felt collectively, even if unexpressed, in the moment.

Theory U

Gestalt philosophy, a German word made popular by the psychologist Fritz Perls, emphasises a term called ‘fertile void,’ a state of unknowing yet pregnant with possibilities if the interconnectedness between people, situation and context of their relationship is allowed free flow and expression resulting in offering maximum options to explore.

Otto Scharmer, in his conceptualization of what is popularly called ‘Theory U’, which is now attracting immense attention by organisational development practitioners suggests that visioning, which is being slowly replaced, I believe, by the word ‘Presencing’, prescribes that when those who are attempting to craft the future for an organisation come together, they should do so with ‘an open mind, an open heart and an open will.’ This can be achieved if each individual who is participating in the exercise is willing in the time that the group is together to attempt and ‘suspend judgment,’ ‘observe and describe not explain,’ thus helping members to redirect their thoughts towards the obvious and let go of thoughts that seem to distract conversations that descend into arguments. ‘Being with Presence’ (energetic availability and fluid responsiveness) as well as feeling present with people in the room and with themselves and experiencing ‘noticing and being noticed’ allows for a sense of permitting full attention, of listening and being attentively listened to and being met in a way that is deeply enthralling. When there is a feeling of being present, individuals feel a sense of being well resourced and engaged. Thus there is also a feeling of being grounded and centered and the chance to feel moved, act and intervene appropriately. It need not be from a place of certainty or from a sense of full knowledge of what can be.

Surplus reality

Psychodrama, a technique that was developed first as a therapy process by the eminent social scientist Jacob Moreno around 1913, emphasised that if one wishes to redefine the future in a way that it shows up possibilities, it is important to imagine and act out the intent dramatically. Psychodrama terms such an act as ‘surplus reality’; the attempt to make real what one wants. Research and development scientists call this ‘prototyping.’ The term so used is in some ways also an exercise to construct the future, in this case perhaps a product.

In human interaction however since the intangibles outweigh what can be physically seen or touched it is important to mobilize within us action and psychodrama helps do this through assisting in enacting the future as it could be.

When participants get together and play out the future dramatically they in effect embody all the elements of the future and concretise both within themselves and with the team the vision of the future.

Thus 'Presencing', enables generative conversations, diffuses possible arguments, and builds on possibilities. In not allowing the current or 'here and now' to emerge and grapple with bringing the past into present thinking, which inevitably will then lead to what we assume a predictable future, we defeat the purpose of recognising that the organisation is actually 'a mystery to be savoured, discovered and revealed but not necessarily a problem to be solved.'

Finally, as Marshall Goldsmith, the world renowned business coach has emphasised, 'what has got you here will not get you there'; we must embrace 'Presencing' as a way of keeping us alive in the moment to possibilities that show up and the vast buffet that life is offering us to choose from. :

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