

Business Line

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On the horns of a dilemma

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*What is the first step to harnessing and cultivating a combined workforce?
Understanding what is actually being said.*



AS a behavioural consultant I have often found that the obvious, what is said, is not the complete picture. It has been a challenge to go below the surface and discover the true intent.

Seeking confirmation

"I have read with interest your resume and noticed that you have worked in the area of change." So said Ms X, CEO of a large manufacturing company. "My managers are individually excellent but are unable to work together. I am also forced to mediate between them and they do not take responsibility."

With this brief, I scheduled meetings with different managers. When I went back to the CEO with my analysis, she said, "Well, I am not surprised!" I was enthused to pursue my diagnostic interpretation and shared it squarely with her. Shortly into the discussion I noticed her interest flagging, she began to nod and as I spoke I sensed a feeling of withdrawal. I realised I was not making headway.

I had accepted the brief assuming that the CEO had wanted a strategy, an analysis, to figure out how to help her address the issue. What I did not bargain for was that she wanted low-risk, low-cost, easy-to-implement recommendations, a turnkey operation.

I now realise that what was sought was my confirmation, not change.

The request for advice was to seek a better way to control other people.

I realise now that when a client asks for a change, he/she wants something new, and it should not carry a price tag. Beliefs cannot be questioned and basic thinking and behaviour cannot be altered. What is desired is the magical new control device that can be smoothly inserted into an already high-control environment. If I had provided the client what she asked, I would be valued but little change would occur. The reason is that there is too much control already.

In addition to the need for control is also the definition that the problem is with `those people.'

The need, therefore, is for a `how to?' Advice and recommendation become acts of collusion with the client against changing the future. Giving an answer on `how to,' which may seem practical and operational, stays on the shelf.

The tyrannical boss

Fast forward to a scenario in which employees say the boss is the problem. I interviewed employees of a small-scale unit, who, the boss felt, needed hand-holding. As I encouraged discussion, the refrain I heard was about the boss's behaviour: `He is too controlling;' `He plays favourites.' `He doesn't communicate enough.' You name it, it was there. If I acted on this I would have had to tell the boss that he must change.

But the truth was available elsewhere. As the saying goes, `Remember the inmates run the prison.' The deeper problem is that members of the team do not support each other. If one member confronts the boss in a meeting, the others must affirm and support verbally. This is not done and support is given after the battle is over.

The team has to overcome its middle-class caution, decide what it needs to get the work done and bring it up with the boss when all are around. Bosses are created by those who work for them. If the boss isn't bossing well, then the team is working well.

Improving cooperation

A multinational wanted to build trust and cooperation between interdependent departments and help them communicate with each other.

The logical outcome of any intervention would have been to encourage sharing and agree on common goals, work out schedules and milestones. But each department defined boundaries tightly and while it was doing a good job within its boundary, there was no attempt to yield territory and control. The question confronting the group was `what are we willing to give up for the sake of the larger purpose?'

Trust is built by telling the truth and through acts of surrender. As consultants, we cannot buy the Aspirin that better communication will be a good start. It will be the start that leads to a lot of motion and no movement. We have to face the unspoken belief that if departments change, cooperation will improve. If departments do not accept that in changing themselves they

may sometimes lose something, then we as consultants become pawns in the negotiating strategy.

The helpless manager

The HR manager of a local organisation invited me to help his managers evolve a better strategy to deal with difficult employees, peers and bosses.

If I had accepted this contract I would have tried to help the individual define his need, recognise his style and would in the process have become involved in helping him in his attempt at stature building.

The truth was that the helpless managers had surrendered their own freedom and lost their sense of own purpose. They had forgotten that they had choices that are independent of the responses of others. As a consultant it is my job to ask them to reclaim what they had given away. If we fail to help the managers understand that what they had given away is their own freedom, they forever stay chained to the whims and shifts of those around. Becoming political and tactically clever won't help because people always know what you are up to and quite effortlessly defend against it.

Getting rid of 'dead wood'

"We must get the right people on the board, help me get rid of dead wood," was the plea of an owner-manager of a small company.

Responding to this request would have meant working on performance management questions and developing competency models so that the evaluation of the 'dead wood' would be more objective and improvement targets self-evident. I would have even talked about an exit package to aid in the housekeeping.

Well, if this is the truth, then what do we do with the ones already on board? The problem was not with the 'dead wood' but in the lack of performing well together. The problem persons were becoming the victims of our projection. The owner-manager was projecting on to the most vulnerable members of the group the problems he did not want to face in himself. In family therapy the child that gets all the negative attention is called the 'identified patient' and that patient carries the symptoms of what is really a family problem.

Wanting proof

'Is your intervention measurable and will it change or improve operations?' A prospective client asked me this question.

My accepting to answer this would have meant pre- and post-evaluation of the intervention.

The truth, however, is that one can measure the impact of an intervention only to the extent that the organisation can measure itself. It is the management's task to know how the organisation is doing. Bringing in a third party, while having its own impact, may often mean interference and not enlightenment. The wish to measure tightly is an expression of doubt.

It is the recognition that every intervention has its own risks. Therefore, dealing with the doubt and risks directly by naming them carefully right at the beginning can generate data about change and account for people's feelings. Perhaps it is wise to convene people once in a while and ask them how it is going. Ultimately, the management will know how they are doing by asking for individual experience. If experience is a good teacher, maybe it also knows how to measure.

Fixing people

'How do I get people to change their behaviour?' is the question I am asked.

My most obvious answer would be to talk of training, spending time defining desirable behaviour and then designing and conducting a programme to endorse this.

But is this really the issue? People are not the problem. For focusing on deficiencies only reinforces them. Change is more likely to occur when we capitalise and bring to bear people's capacities and gifts and strengths.

The 'fixing' mentality must be given up. Helping groups decide where they are, where they want to go, with emphasis on their underutilised capacities, is a faster and cheaper path to learning. This engagement effort will lead to a level of accountability.

They don't work together

'Ram and Shyam don't work well together. Help them resolve their conflict.' So was I invited to facilitate a rapprochement.

Acceptance of this definition would have meant developing a mediation process to help them come together.

While conflict resolution is valuable, it is not the answer. The caution is to test whether Ram and Shyam want to work it out. Too often, the boss wants the resolution but the combatants do not. Resolution strategies depend on willingness to move from 'my perch.' If this is absent only surgery will help. As consultants if we try to resolve all conflicts we may lose credibility.

Sometimes, confronting the players with the belief that we cannot help them raises the stakes and wakes them up to the cost of their conflict. Often, what seems a problem between two is really a problem between three. The person who asks us to get involved is also a player in this game. We must, therefore, be open to the possibility of a dysfunctional triangle and try to understand the role of the sponsor of the mediation who might be keeping Ram and Shyam apart. If this is the case, Ram and Shyam will feel it. So we must ask them what role the sponsor plays in their relationship and what impact that has.

Will this idea work?

Sometimes, I have been asked by clients to encourage creativity, out-of-the-box thinking, but give them the assurance that what is being contemplated has been tried before.

My acknowledging this desire will mean looking for organisations in the same business and researching examples of working propositions.

The reality is that what is working somewhere does not need to work here. Ideas have to be customised and we risk making a false promise if we support the idea that a change can be imported with little risk.

It is helpful to make the client understand that behind their question of where it is working are doubts and anxieties. They want guarantees. We as consultants cannot give this guarantee as much depends on the energy and investment of the client. The attempt has to be to help the client make a good decision.

Clients will make a better decision if they understand all that is required to make change. Consulting sometimes carries the shame of promising too much too soon. To recognise what is working elsewhere might be useful, but cannot be a substitute for a willingness to try something new.

Can you define it?

'Can you help us define leadership, empowerment, the role of manager?' asked a home appliances' manufacturer.

Accepting his brief I spent a lot of time trying to define what each word meant. I produced manuals and short brochures. I attempted to define a comprehensive list of skills needed.

Later, however, I realised that the request for definition was not a problem of clarity but an expression of disagreement. In spite of the definitions, the questions persisted. I realised that the wish for clear definition was another form of wish for safety. Defining terms is an academic diversion from the more fundamental questions involving risk, purpose and courage. Safety comes from the experience of discovery, acting in the face of our fears, not waiting to act until our fears have disappeared. It is not until I try something that I will realise that I will survive it.

Setting standards

There is a belief that for change to occur we must set high standards and develop clear measures against the standard.

If one is to act on this, then we attempt to set standards and recognise that unsatisfactory performance is caused because the standards are not being met.

The question is not about standards but about who sets the standard and how they are measured. Too often they are used as a control device and not as a mechanism for learning. Standards become dogmas. This is alright for engineering projects but not for human development. Standard-setting is a class struggle where one class of people is setting standards for another.

The solution is to have the people close to the work define the measures that will have meaning for them. Then ask them how they want to hold

themselves accountable. This reduces the possibility that standards and measures will become punitive. Once measures become punitive, people will work to outsmart them. Learning diminishes and energy that should be going towards achieving the work is replaced by trying to beat the system.

(The writer is a behavioural consultant.)