

AUTHENTIC TEAMING: UNDISCUSSABLES, LEADERSHIP AND THE ROLE OF THE CONSULTANT

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the impact on a team and its members of learning how to work with the underlying and hidden dimensions of their interpersonal interactions and behaviours. Using an action research approach, the researcher/consultant worked, over a ten month period, with an executive team.

The expectation was that taking the team through such a process would result in members being able to have more honest, candid conversations with fewer “undiscussables.” It was further hoped that the increased openness would result in enhanced team performance and improved business results. The study has implications for both leaders and organization development consultants as they contemplate their roles in organizations.

Introduction

In today's knowledge and team-based economy where the exchange of information is critical to successful organizational performance, the ability to engage in productive conversation in which real issues are surfaced and views are openly shared is critical.

A review of current writing on teamwork and team development reveals a wide body of literature that cites open communication and the development of honest, candid conversation as hallmarks of team effectiveness (Douglas, Martin & Krapels, 2006;; Goman, 2004; Goodbody, J. (2005); 1994; Hirst & Mann, 2004; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Ng & Liang, 2005; Patrashkova-Volzdoska, Ralitza, McComb, Gree & Compton, 2003; Peters & Fletcher, 2004; Scholtes, Joiner & Streibel, 1996). Virtually all models of team and work group effectiveness acknowledge that the interpersonal process is a crucial antecedent of team performance.

Harvard educator, Chris Argyris (1990), claims that organizational effectiveness is a function of the interpersonal competence of team members and the extent to which the organization supports positive norms. The latter includes the ability to be open and candid about ideas and feelings and to help others be open and candid. Morrison & Milliken (2000) argue that the tendency towards organizational silence that grips many companies results in a vicious cycle of reduced candor and flawed group decision making. Grenny (2003), Perlow & Williams (2003) and Scott (2007) go so far as to suggest that the inability to talk about the crucial issues facing organizations can have disastrous and very costly consequences.

A number of authors advocate the value of "straight talk" in reducing misunderstandings and harnessing people's thoughts and feelings to the accomplishment of the team's work (Antonioni, 2006; Blanton, 1996, cited in Van Housen, 1997; Charan, 2006; Edmondson & Smith, 2006; Scott, 2007).

The Challenge

While there is clearly a wide body of literature that both extols the virtue of and offers a variety of tools to facilitate open communication in enhancing team functioning, there is very little that addresses the more difficult issue of the often torturous journey team members take in daring to speak their minds and risk exposing their own and others' vulnerabilities.

Argyris (1990) has given significant attention in his writing to the difficulty individuals have in coming together in open, non-defensive communication. In much of his writing, he addresses the issue of individual and organizational defenses that collude to keep the undiscussables undiscussable (Argyris, 1990, 1991, 1994).

Recognizing the difficulty people have with speaking candidly, Ng & Liang (2005) advocate a paper dialogue approach where people record their thoughts on paper and the identity of the 'contributors' is kept confidential. Beer & Eisenstat (2004) describe a 9-step organization-wide process for engaging employees in candid conversations about the company's business strategy. Patterson et al (2002) outline step-by-step ways to engage in "crucial conversations" but the focus is on one-on-one conversations as opposed to those that need to occur in a team setting.

The decision to conduct the research described here came as a result of the observations I had made in my work as an organization development consultant about the difficulty people had in speaking the truth to one another in the course of their day-to-day work. In particular, my work with senior leaders and their teams revealed a consistent pattern of reluctance to engage in open, candid conversations, this often despite their espoused desire to do so.

Description of the Research Process

The study (Archer, 2000) was aimed at understanding the impact on team members and the team as a whole of learning how to engage in more transparent, candid conversations. While the original question was limited to examining the impact of such an approach to teaming, the findings revealed broader objectives related to understanding the process involved in taking such a journey, and the difficulty both in sustaining the learnings and in transferring the insights and new behaviours to the day-to-day business environment.

The study was placed within the qualitative paradigm in its exploratory nature, and used an action research methodology, following the four phases of data gathering and diagnosis, joint planning with participants, implementation and evaluation (French & Bell, 1995). The research plan called for an intact workplace team to be assessed before and after a teaming process in order to evaluate the impact which surfacing and dealing with their covert processes had on team members' perceptions both of themselves individually and on their functioning as a team.

The team chosen was the senior management group of a subsidiary company, ABC Inc., of a large financial services institution, Axworthy Global. ABC was composed of two distinct businesses, one dealing with leasing agreements and one with small business loans. The company was in severe financial difficulties and in danger of being shut down unless significant improvement could be demonstrated within one year. There were many tensions both between the two businesses and between members who had a history at ABC and those who were recent arrivals to the company. Sandra, the new president, believed that the company could only deliver on its promises if these tensions were addressed and if the members could work to become a strong, cohesive team.

The team was observed and members were interviewed individually before the study began. The approach entailed working with the participant group in an intensive teaming process which would assist them in uncovering the covert processes that were operating within the team, and thus, having an impact on their effectiveness. This involved using a variety of tools and concepts that have been designed to facilitate the surfacing of assumptions, beliefs and unspoken thoughts and feelings. Examples are the left-hand column exercise based on Argyris' and Schön's two-column research method (1974) and the ladder of inference (Argyris, 1990).

One and two-day off-site teaming sessions were combined with process observation at team meetings over a ten month period. Following the teaming process, and after a timeframe of four months to allow for the team to work with and further integrate their learnings, they were again observed in a team meeting and members interviewed. Using a constant comparative method, the data were analyzed and interpreted, with ongoing feedback to and input from the participants.

Summary of Findings

The initial round of data collection revealed that this was a team with many unresolved issues. The combination of "new to the company" and longer-tenured team members as well as a new leader who seemed determined to "put the past behind us" resulted in low levels of trust and a number of major undiscussables. Following the data collection phase in March, the teaming process began with the team embarking on a lengthy and difficult journey that contained many peaks and valleys. The euphoria of the early sessions where all the key issues had been raised, and the cathartic relief expressed by team members, was followed by a period of leveling off where there was less focus on emotions as attention turned to critical business issues.

Changes in team membership and increasing business pressures over the summer months saw the honeymoon period end and issues went underground as “meetings after-the-meeting” once again became the norm. With ongoing work over the fall, progress resumed, old issues were revisited and new ones addressed, at the same time that mounting business pressures competed for the team’s already overcrowded schedules.

The last off-site teaming session was held in February. Despite the fact that the research study called for my non-involvement for a four-month timeframe, my commitment to team members in my role as consultant resulted in an invitation to Sandra to contact me should circumstances change.

I did not hear from Sandra during this period despite a substantial increase in business pressures and tensions. The second set of interviews almost 15 months after the study began, revealed that while some of the old undiscussables had been adequately addressed and were no longer seen to be as problematic, new issues had surfaced which were not being acknowledged. Ultimately, by the end of May, 1999, ABC Inc. was dismantled with the sales side sold off and the leasing side partnering with an American company. The unresolved issues remained and resentment on the sales side was significant.

In looking at the original question about the impact of the study at the individual and team levels, the findings are anything but straightforward. Most members felt positively affected at a personal level, were aware of their own defensive patterns in team interactions and believed that they would take the learnings into their work on future teams. Some reported ways in which they were already utilizing their individual learnings with their own work groups and in other teaming environments. One year after the second set of interviews, a few members who were contacted

again about other unrelated business issues confirmed the ongoing benefit to them both individually and in their current teaming work.

At the ABC team level, some felt that members had been better able to come together in a most challenging business environment because of the teaming process they had engaged in. They attributed this to their efforts to improve their interaction patterns, more specifically, to surface the difficult issues and speak more openly at critical points along the way. Those who did not see the benefits for the ABC team attributed this largely to the extreme “life and death” business situation. Despite the mixed outcomes, these members were convinced of the value of doing this type of work. At the same time, many did not see themselves collectively as a more effective team and were discouraged by the undiscussables that remained.

A closer examination of the dynamics revealed that the key factors which influenced the team’s success or failure were: the authority issues around the leader role (involving the CEO and 2 Senior Vice-Presidents) and a flawed team structure that saw the two sides of the business becoming more and more separate and mistrusting of each other

In the end, despite acknowledging that they had learned a great deal at both individual and team levels and had come through a torturous journey together, members were unable to look at their learnings and accomplishments, heal the wounds and put positive closure to their work together.

Implications for Practice

This study has implications for both organization development consultants and for leaders at all levels in today’s corporate world. I will begin by exploring the increasing requirement for the OD consultant who works with teams to include self-reflection and personal mastery as an

integral part of her role. I will then comment on the issue of sustainability of learnings and offer a model for working with teams that is based on the research outcomes.

Personal Mastery for the OD Consultant

The increasing complexity of today's organizational culture has made the ability to collaborate in teaming structures more important than ever before. We are asking employees to demonstrate greater sensitivity in their interactions in the workplace and the demand for leaders to demonstrate emotional intelligence has been documented. At the same time, the turbulent corporate environment has mobilized people's defenses against the anxiety generated by decreased job security and the resulting impact on self-esteem.

In such an environment, organization development consultants cannot be left behind. Our world has also become more complex, and the demand on us to be aware of the impact of dysfunctional dynamics on organizational effectiveness has increased.

Such a stance requires courage. As I found in working with the ABC team, the consultant has to be prepared to live on this ambiguous edge between excitement and anxiety. She must be willing to acknowledge her shortcomings and model the very behaviour she is demanding of the client. Indeed, rather than trying to be the "perfect consultant" who is never caught in her defenses with our clients, we need to recognize that we will "fall out of role." The real learning comes in being willing to engage with the client to learn together about some aspect of the system that hitherto had eluded us.

As with leaders who did not bargain for this level of personal mastery work, one wonders whether the OD consultant is up to the challenge. Many might balk at the suggestion that they open themselves up to the scrutiny of the client. It seems that, like the manager who is trying to

let go of the role of infallible “heroic leader,” the consultant who contracts to work with teams in today’s complex, emotionally challenging environment must also work from a “confidence/humility” stance. She must have enough confidence in herself to acknowledge her humility in the face of her own shortcomings.

The consultant who is willing to accept this daunting challenge cannot work in isolation. To be able to contain the often confusing messages that come from being open requires considerable support so that one is not inappropriately drawn into the client’s organizational culture and defensive patterns. Consultants working at this level need to work in teams of colleagues, or use one another as shadow consultants for supervision and dialogue when their own repressed emotions are awakened by identification with the experiences and feelings of their clients (Menzies Lyth, 1989).

Sustainability of Learnings

A key finding which this study highlights is the difficulty people have transferring the learnings gained in an off-site environment into their day-to-day business environment. The ABC team made significant strides in their teaming sessions only to find that their good intentions were not equal to the everyday crises and demands “back at the office.” This tendency for teams to revert to older, safer, more comfortable patterns. suggests that improved team performance will not occur without the consistent practice of newly acquired learnings.

This becomes an even greater issue when we are talking about changing mindsets and defensive routines that protect us from feelings of vulnerability and shame. While the concepts may not be complicated, without ongoing and repeated opportunities to practise, the necessary transformation in thinking and interacting will not occur. The AutoCo Epsilon program (Roth &

Kleiner, 1996) used learning lab simulations as practice fields for challenging assumptions and working with mental models. Results were mixed and indicated that participants had difficulty in transferring learning from the simulator to real world environments.

The transitions from Model I (I must remain in control, win and not upset or embarrass people) to Model II thinking (I want valid information and informed choice) (Argyris & Schon, 1990) and from single to double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978) ask that people make fundamental shifts which will be anxiety provoking and result, ironically, in more defensive reasoning (Diamond, 1986). The ability to suspend assumptions and shift mindsets, requires people to “plumb the depths of emotional history” (Long & Newton, 1995). Such shifts will take time, support and opportunities to reflect and practise.

The organization development consultant who works with teams at this level must recognize this need for ongoing practice. Off-site teaming sessions will simply not be enough. Indeed, in a fast-paced, increasingly competitive business environment, there is greater resistance to taking time out of an already overloaded agenda to schedule one or two-day teaming sessions. While my experience suggests that most teams require some off-site sessions, especially in the initial stages of their work together, consultants will meet less resistance if they partner with their clients in “real time” around real business issues.

In my work with the ABC team, I used process observation in their business meetings as a tool to assist members to integrate their learnings into their “real work” together.

In addition to working with the team in their business meetings, individual coaching for team leaders becomes critically important. We have already seen that today’s leader is being asked to achieve new levels of self-awareness and emotional intelligence. If, as I have suggested, he is going to be a catalyst in modeling effective, less defensive communication patterns, he must

be supported to look at his leadership style and its impact on the team. While executive coaching is a buzzword in today's organization, it can only be effective if it is done within the context of the leader's day-to-day interactions with colleagues and team members. The consultant who is working with the team is in an ideal position to provide the leader with regular feedback and coaching to help him reflect on and change his dysfunctional patterns.

Team members, too, may require support and coaching to make individual changes. A self-assessment instrument may be useful in providing a forum for dialogue that will assist members to examine their mental models and defensive patterns.

A final consideration that arises out of the above recommendations concerns the need for careful and complete contracting with both the leader and the team. A contract is "an explicit agreement of what the consultant and client expect from each other and how they are going to work together" (Block, 1981). The consultant who considers this approach to teamwork must make her client aware of what the work will include. Both the leader and team members must enter into such a potentially difficult process with their eyes open. They must know that they are contracting to do ongoing work that may not be easy. The difficulty for the consultant is to ensure that she is honest with clients about what the work may involve without frightening them away. She needs to be able to create an environment where clients (leader and team members) can make an informed choice about the teaming approach they wish to take.

The Authentic Teaming Model

Figure 5 offers a team development model that is based on the findings from this research study. It includes the following components:

This model has become a template for my current work with business teams. While many of the components were ones I have always used, the emphasis has changed considerably.

When working with executive or senior teams where all members are also leaders, I encourage members to engage in dialogue around the topic of leadership early on in the process. Using the conversation tools as outlined in this study (left-hand column, ladder of inference, balancing advocacy with inquiry) (Archer, 2000), members are encouraged to challenge the assumptions they hold about their roles as leaders and to look at the impact these might have on their interactions. These conversations serve an added function of building trust and breaking down barriers to honest communication as members wrestle with shared struggles around their leadership roles. In addition, they build a foundation for developing communities of practice around areas of common interest or concern.

Consultants working with teams need to find a balance between zealously confronting difficult issues “head-on” and avoiding them altogether. They need to be sensitive to the clients’ readiness to work with difficult interpersonal issues. Without ignoring these, they can look for opportunities to build common ground around issues that engage people “at the heart.” In so doing, they may avoid opening up topics which are driven by team members’ own “baggage” and which are not relevant to the business at hand.

These conversations will be based on learning together, sharing best practices, or creating desired futures. They will provide members with a safer, less threatening environment in which to learn and practice the conversation tools they will need when they are confronted with difficult interpersonal dynamics.

A comment I make frequently to team members is: “Trust the process.” This phrase has become even more meaningful for me as I integrate the learnings from this study into my work in organizations. The emphasis in my work with teams has shifted from off-site teaming sessions to ongoing process consultation in business meetings. While I continue to see the need for both, my mental model has shifted from the more traditional “teambuilding” to “teaming” processes which are driven by the clients’ day-to-day business issues and which occur as frequently in regular meetings as in off-site sessions. The lesson for me, and perhaps for all consultants who engage in the work of teaming, is to trust the process to unfold in an organic way, driven by the team’s and the organization’s unique challenges rather than by my own needs for control and certainty.

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