



This is November 2009's newsletter, Changing Organisations, for my clients and other professionals interested in organisational change.

This month's [changingorganisations](#) is in four parts:

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In Change Situations, Familiarity Breeds Lack of Noticing

Why is it that it is so hard for your people to articulate to you what is actually going on?



In my consulting work I often find that clients who tell me of a problem or issue they want to resolve, often have great difficulty explaining what is going on and what it is that they see as the problem. They know that there is a problem and they know roughly what it is - they definitely know who is involved. It's just so darned hard to articulate the multitude of factors and the complexity of the problem(s)

The challenge seems to be in explaining the situation to someone who is not intimately involved. At one point I used to think that this meant that the person must be not very competent if they couldn't describe what's happening. But then a colleague graciously pointed out that I have the same difficulty in explaining my own practice. I had to admit that there are so many nuances that are difficult to explain, and I started to appreciate that explaining our practice is difficult for everyone. You end up repeating yourself, skirting around the issue and providing a picture that is not very coherent. It becomes like an onion where you are trying to unravel the layers and it makes you cry while you're doing it, if you're not careful.

It can be just as hard for your people to explain to you what is going on in their work situations, especially if you are not intimately involved in their work and lives. Their efforts to explain can seem bumbling and incompetent.

Why is it so hard for people to explain what is going on in their everyday experience?

The attempt to explain what is going on to a non-judgemental listener can be helpfully therapeutic for the person doing the explaining; after all, providing a forum for people to explain what is going on in their internal world is the idea on which the whole world of therapy is based! But here I want to concentrate on why it is that it is so difficult to explain what is going on and why this is important for managers.

I turn to the insights of social researchers, who spend their time asking questions to try to find out what is going on in various aspects of social and organisational life. Managers and consultants have a lot in common with social researchers, who are also asking questions, and using the answers to help make sense of the world.

The main difference is that as a manager you have to act in your organisation based on the sense you make of what is going on. Social researchers have as a first priority the necessity to write about what they learn, rather than act to influence and change what is going on. But both are seeking to understand what are primarily social processes.

By the way, the sense you make of what is going on is based on what you observe, what others tell you, and your own experience. These are all accounts of what is going on. They are not really objective reality, even though they can seem very compelling. How good are you at distinguishing between interpretation and "the facts?" Helping your people to make this distinction can be a very powerful act of leadership.

But I digress. Back to the question of why it is so hard to articulate what is going on.

Anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has something to offer here. He says that for Western social researchers asking questions about a group of people, for example, a group of African tribespeople, there is a lot that is taken for granted in the answers given, a lot that is not said by the tribespeople. The tacit assumptions, taken-for-granted ways of thinking and "models" that the tribespeople use are important, but are left unsaid.

In other words, for the tribespeople, when talking about their customs and practices, they are talking about things that are so familiar that they do not really notice them any more. The tribespeople are not able to talk about them because they do not notice them, and so important assumptions are left unsaid. I suppose it's a bit like the fish that does not notice the water it's swimming in. Or like the air that we breathe that we do not notice from moment to moment, unless it's not there (e.g. asthma).

Managers are in the same boat, as are leadership researchers and consultants. When leaders are asked about their leadership, and when staff are asked questions by their managers, they find themselves in a

world of familiarity, and hence a lot gets left unsaid. This is by necessity, not by design. After all, you couldn't spend days and days explaining every single nuance. But, also, you often are not aware of the nuances until you are in a situation where the nuances become important - for example when you find out that one of your managers has given their people an incorrect view of the changes you are instigating because there was an important detail or nuance that you took for granted and left out of your briefing to them. You can't predict every eventuality.

Or perhaps when a staff member seems slightly out of sorts but you can't pin your finger on why, so you let it go just like you have other times, only this time the situation erupts into a conflict.

I was talking to a senior manager the other day about how I could help in a situation of deep seated, long-lived conflict in a group he had just started managing. He explained some of the difficulties he was experiencing and how, when attempting to address the issue, he had to be careful not to inflame it into open warfare. He wanted to get to the bottom of the situation and resolve it. But a direct approach was not possible without destroying what fragile relationships currently exist. The total situation and a mix of direct and indirect approaches had to be considered.

I think that often these tacit assumptions are addressed either in a mechanical way (e.g. "n-step" change processes) or ways that are overly structured in order to handle the fear that these could erupt into open conflict. For example, it is tempting, as the person trying to find out what is going on, to ask a set of structured questions. This has the appeal of directing the conversation the way you want it to go. You can then appear to keep a conversation "on track." It also has the risk that the participants can feel manipulated.

In my consulting work, I've had to get good at finding out quickly what is going on, in complex situations. Experience of similar situations in the past is helpful, and over time this has moved me away from the structured questions approach. I'll never forget being a "user representative" for a potential Customer Relationship Management system in one place where I worked. I was invited to participate in an interview where the project team were talking to users to try to specify the requirements for the system. They asked me so many closed questions based on their predetermined options that we both got frustrated with each other because where I wanted to go didn't fit into any of the alternatives they were exploring.

I resolved not to fall into that trap myself when I was seeking information from others. But the answer is not simply to stay away from closed questions.

Managers need to understand that it is difficult for people to explain the world in which they live, because it is so familiar that the everyday assumptions under which they operate become invisible until they are needed for a specific situation. Structured questioning then will not work

in the sense that it will identify these “unthought-of” assumptions – structured questioning will not help you as a manager make sense of the world of those in your team.

Instead, seek to enter into joint enquiry with others. Seek to encourage them to talk about their reality and realise that they will usually talk about it in a round about way, because they have no choice due to the unspoken assumptions that are invisible like the air they breathe. Then probe into areas of what they have said that are different from your perspective. Perhaps there are things they say that are not clear, or that seem to have holes or discrepancies from your point of view, or where you identify potentially fruitful possibilities based on your perspective.

That way, your perspective will be able to help the other person to become aware of previously taken-for-granted assumptions, and you also might become aware of some of your own assumptions. If so, you will be able to create a new joint understanding from which something new will emerge. This is the essence of organisational change.

Hot Off the [changingorganisations](#) Blog

This month, the hot topic on the blog was a questioning of “[best practice](#),” which even attracted a reference to [Dilbert](#). One comment drew attention to the following recommendation I made.

Instead of looking at best practice, focus your attention on the particularities of your situation, trying to understand all the factors at work, not just those prescribed in your best practice model. Reflect on how your own participation is affecting, and is affected by, the way these factors are playing out in your organisation. That way you can help to make sure your attention is on what really matters – how you and others are interacting with each other and influencing each other in the process of getting the work done.

By the way, another record month on the blog in October - ninth month in a row.

New Website and Newsletter Format

I am very excited to be in the process of developing my new website and an associated new look for this newsletter for 2010. More next month.

In the Press

I was recently interviewed by Dalia Fahmy for One + magazine in the US about how meeting planners can be more strategic. She picked up on a point from my current white paper [Four Strategic Mistakes In Using Group Sessions for Organisational Change](#) that conferences and road shows intended to foster change focus too much on formal presentations and should include opportunities for informal avenues such as small group discussions or mingling opportunities for senior managers.

Conclusion

Spring in theory should be moving into summer now, here in New Zealand. Very soon we will be shutting up the hay paddocks to start growing our hay. I am looking forward to our summer season and I hope you too are looking forward to the final quarter of 2009.

Regards,



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