Preparing for High Impact Organizational Change

Experiential Learning and Practice

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7. From both sides to all sides: creating common ground where there has been none before

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One of the biggest challenges in any change effort is to align the beliefs and perceptions of the many parts in the system in order to take concerted action going forward. Whether it is a merger, acquisition, cross-departmental reorganization, change of strategy, or change of leadership, creating a commonly held narrative is vital to getting minds and hearts working together, aligned around a common set of facts and beliefs among organizational or community members. Successful organizational change – from mergers and acquisitions to internal reorganization – depends in large part on a clear vision of the desired future state, a common understanding of what brought the parties to this point, and their ability to be honest with themselves and each other about the beliefs and opinions they hold about each other. The two activities outlined in this chapter help to achieve the latter two.

Two good starting points for the change leader and/or facilitator are: (1) how to create conversations that help to build one common group among people who do not know each other and may in fact be threatened by each other; and (2) how to build the trust necessary to have that conversation. It is important to be deliberate about establishing a positive climate in which all can be honest with themselves and each other about assumptions, beliefs, projections, and generalizations about others engaged in the process. In some cases, this could be management versus staff. In others, it could be intra-departmental rivalries. In yet others, it could be the different entities involved in a merger or acquisition.

Given the high stakes in these conversations, it is helpful to use activities that enable honesty and truth-telling, and at the same time encourage a sense of humor and relief from the deadly serious tone that many such exercises require. It is also imperative to be intentional about creating the narrative for the change program, both about who we are and what has happened in the past, and who we want to be together in the future. Open,

transparent, real-time activities that engage the whole system, as both of these activities do, go a long way toward creating the narrative that is required for a successful change effort.

The two activities outlined in this chapter – the "Argument of Obviousness" and "Dealing in Decades" – are designed to assist organizations in realizing and capitalizing on the complexity in the system. The route to complexity requires acknowledging that there are two underlying dimensions of organizational life, differentiation and integration, both of which must be dealt with, which might seem paradoxical. These two dialectically linked processes encourage us all and our organizations to reach their fullest potential and uniqueness (differentiation), while at the same time recognizing and committing to a whole that is larger than any one individual or entity (integration).

Given the significant differences that exist in organizations, the differentiation challenge is to better understand the ways in which the various entities come to a clear understanding of who they are. Integration reflects how these entities find common ground and help each other to reach common goals together. The both/and here dimensions are typically clear to participants. In an organization that is differentiated but not well integrated, there is individuality, freedom, and encouragement of differences, but not the kind of organizational discipline to make the entity much more than the sum of its parts. In an organization that is integrated but not well differentiated, policies and procedures are clear and compliance is required, often at the expense of individual commitment and creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009).

Before introducing the two exercises, a few guiding thoughts are in order. First, revealing the perceptions that each entity holds of the other, which are often covert, is critical to any successful integration. Once at least a portion of these covert generalizations is made public and shared with each other, differentiation may continue (Marshak, 2006). Only when the parties know and understand each other better can integration truly continue on a solid footing of mutual respect and understanding.

A second key to successfully executing these activities is the participants' sense of free choice in what they say and how they show up. "Lewin's theory suggests that the choices an individual makes are not just the result of personal inside forces, but are affected by everyone in the group and the circumstances of the environment" (Smith and Leeming, 2011, p. 178). It follows that the full and free participation of all rests on their individual freedom to act on their own beliefs and feelings, unconstrained by requirements or expectations imposed from above or outside.

Finally, leaders and facilitators of these activities must feel free to amend or improvise along the way, based on the actions and reactions among

participants. Redesign choices could include "adjusting the parameters of an activity, imposing time limits, allowing or disallowing certain activities, and placing limits on members of the group" (Smith and Leeming, 2011, p. 178). The time, setting, climate of the group, set-up in the room, and a dozen other factors can change the dynamics of the exercise, and it is up to the leader or facilitator to make those judgments in the moment.

THE ARGUMENT OF OBVIOUSNESS

The Argument of Obviousness is an experiential exercise exploring differentiation:

> Diagnose the differences that matter. In many cases, there are significant differences between the acquirer's culture and that of the acquired. But it can be difficult to pinpoint where, and how substantial, the differences are. (Stafford and Miles, 2013, Heading: "Next, diagnose the differences that matter," para 1)

The exercise encourages the separate parties in the merger, acquisition, or intra-organizational restructuring to give voice to the beliefs and assumptions that each side holds about the other by creating caricatures of each other. By responding to eight questions that are clearly generalizations and intended to elicit extreme perceptions of the other, the exercise helps to reveal the unspoken prejudices held by each side in a way that is both honest and humorous. The very act of generalizing and caricaturing the others help all sides to reveal the limitations of their own views, which can be useful in overcoming the stereotypes that underlie the caricatures.

These generalizations and stereotypes are often based on little information, often attached to the role, function, or job type, or even just the reputation of the other entity. Statements often heard are based on the jobs of the others, such as "We all know what accountants are like," or, "No one likes working for that organization," based on its reputation. The exercise is designed to assist in the differentiation between or among the various entities involved in the change project.

The goals of the Argument of Obviousness are to:

- help participants get in touch with their own prejudices and assumptions about others involved in the same change process;
- explore the different perceptions that each group has of the other(s);
- get out on the table and hopefully dispel some of the negative or unhelpful assumptions and beliefs that would limit the success of the change program; and

- lay the groundwork for building trust among the various parties and contribute to creating a narrative about the past that becomes the basis for the change program going forward.

The Argument of Obviousness can be used in the following ways:

- as part of a process of bringing together different elements of a community or organization;
- as a means of differentiating the different entities in a merger, acquisition, or organizational restructuring;
- as a light and humorous way to make explicit some of the stereotypes and prejudices that might be held by differing sides.

There are a number of advantages of this activity: (1) it is simple and easy to set up; (2) no specialized knowledge or tools are required, so everyone can easily contribute; (3) everyone has something to contribute; and (4) it is different from the kinds of activities that usually occur in these settings. At the same time, the exercise has an underlying disadvantage: if the differences between the groups are seriously felt and deeply held, the exercise could amplify those differences and make integration even harder.

The Exercise

- Intended audience: the separate parties of any organizational restructuring, merger, realignment, or acquisition.
- Duration: 40–60 minutes, depending upon how the debrief is structured.
- Exercise preparation (materials, room set-up, pre-work for participants, and so on): the activity requires participants to be seated at tables of six, eight, or ten, with tables grouped by organization, with the members of one organization sitting on one side of the room, and the members of the other organization sitting on the other side of the room. If there are three or more groups in the exercise, arrange the tables of each group together.

The Argument of Obviousness is comprised of the eight statements below. It is recommended to print one copy for each participant, and one for each table, so that each person can complete all eight and then discuss their results with others at their tables. A computer and projector are needed to project the questions during the work of the individuals and tables, and to record the results from all of the groups for all to see. It is helpful to leave enough room between statements to record the results from all of the

tables. Before the event begins, it is helpful to recruit someone to record the tables' results into the document projected onto the screen.

The Argument of Obviousness statements are:

- Wouldn't it be cool if . . .
- And we didn't have to . . .
- And we could just . . .
- And then we could . . .
- All of {them} are {blank}
- None of {them} ever does {blank}
- The only way to motivate {them} is {blank}
- The only thing {they} are good at is {blank}

Each person receives a handout with the eight Argument of Obviousness statements, and each table receives one additional handout.

Instructions for facilitators

This activity is a high energy, fast paced way to get at the stereotypes that each side might hold of the other. It is important to keep things moving quickly so that participants do not overthink their answers. The following are general guidelines for conducting the exercise:

1. Briefly explain the purpose of the exercise. In this case, a lot of detail up front often limits the impact of the event. A brief statement along the following lines is sufficient: "Our goal is to get some perceptions of each other out in the open and on the table."
2. Distribute hard copies of the eight Argument of Obviousness statements to each table, and project these questions on the screen.
3. Outline the goals of the exercise (above) and that each table will come up with their own answers to the eight statements which will be shared with everyone in the room.
4. Ask each person to take just a minute to complete the eight statements in the handout, and encourage them to be provocative and outrageous if they want. Explain that they will share their answers with others at their table and that each table will have 7–8 minutes to develop a consensus set of answers to the questions, which will be shared with everyone in the room.
5. Task the individuals to complete the statements in approximately two minutes.
6. Task the table groups to discuss the individuals' responses to the statements and give them approximately 7–8 minutes to come up with the most interesting, or provocative, or funny responses on behalf of

the whole table. Explain that the purpose is not to have the best, well-formed consensus answers for each statement, but rather to come up with answers that seem true but may be provocative or funny.

7. After 7–8 minutes, and with a quick pace, ask each table to report its results. Make sure that they are being recorded by your volunteer properly on the master document on the computer for projection on the screen or a series of flipcharts. It is likely that the listeners in the other organization will want to question, respond, or argue with what is being said. Explain that there will be time for each side to respond once both sides are complete.

8. Once all of the tables have reported on both sides, display on the computer for projection on the screen or a series of flipcharts the results from all of the tables from the first group about the second group. Ask the members of the second group to call out their responses to what the first group has said about them. Hear them quickly; there is not normally a need to do any table work on this, or to record their responses, as that slows down the conversation and makes it a more rational and analytical exercise than is intended.

9. Then display the results from all of the tables from the second group about the first group. Ask the members of the first group to call out their responses to what the second group has said about them. Again hear them quickly; there is not normally a need to do any table work on this, or to record their responses, as that slows down the conversation.

10. Reconfigure the tables to maximize a mix of participants from both groups and as many functions as possible.

11. Task the groups to discuss the stereotypes that they have heard. Encourage all to listen carefully to what others are saying about their group, and to be open to the possibility that there is some truth in what is said.

Debrief for participants

Remembering that the goal of this exercise is to reveal biases and generalized prejudices on each side about the other(s), there are some questions to consider offering to the group once the activity is over, including, "In this exercise. . .":

- What did you learn about yourselves as a group?
- What did you learn about the people in the other group(s)?
- What about what they said about you did you find interesting? Funny? Accurate? Completely wrong?
- When you heard what they said about your group, how did you feel?

- When you heard what they said about your group, how did you feel about their group?
- When you heard what they said about your group, what did you want to say to them?

If time is short, these questions can be asked in plenary in 5–10 minutes. If there is more time, these questions can be worked at each table, and potentially in each group. The final question for the debrief is, "Now that you've done this, how will you behave differently in interacting with people from the other group(s)?"

Final Thoughts

This activity excels at getting participants from opposite sides of a system engaged in a simple but meaningful task, with very little explanation or time needed up front. It is excellent at exploring the differences among/ between groups involved in the organizational change. It helps to accomplish the differentiation among/between groups that is necessary en route to the integration that is required for any successful merger, acquisition, or organizational integration. Even though the content of the exercise is about differences, it often has the desirable effect of bringing both/all sides of the change process together by exposing the very generalizations and projections that perpetuate and amplify our differences.

DEALING IN DECADES

Another challenge in organizational change is to create one whole perspective or aligned mindset among the multiple people and individual parts of a system. Where the preceding exercise emphasized differentiation, this is a natural follow-up emphasizing integration. It is particularly useful after the differences have been explored and the components have been united into the same organization.

There are many ways to do this, but Dealing in Decades is intentionally designed to flatten the hierarchy, give all voices equal weight, and to engage the whole system including all of its subsidiary components all at once in creating the history and current perspective on the organization. This is an important factor in a system in which people with titles or roles have undue influence and where there are concerns about bringing forth voices of those who have previously been marginalized. As noted by Roberts (2012, p. 15):

While it is certainly the case in the twenty-first century that notions of experience from women, African Americans, Native Americans, and other marginalized groups both in the West and in the developing world are rising in attention and prominence, more work needs to be done in exploring the intersections between these so-called marginalized or subaltern voices and present-day experiential education.

This exercise enables voices from all corners of the organization to be heard fully and to contribute to the joint creation of the organization's history, thereby creating an inclusive environment for marginalized people to come forward, be heard, and fully contribute.

Dealing in Decades is a small, simple, experiential activity that achieves large-scale results. The goals of the activity are to:

- engage the whole system in a fun, interesting, and highly participative activity;
- complement the organization's efforts to integrate different components into one coherent whole;
- establish a narrative around a commonly held set of facts about the history of the organization, including key leaders, pivotal events, and how the organization has navigated its outside environment;
- lay the groundwork for understanding the organization as it exists today, and the organization's past as its prologue and the necessary precursor to creating a narrative for the future;
- flatten the hierarchy and equalize all voices in the room.

Dealing in Decades can be used in the following ways:

- to create a shared sense of history among members of a community or organization;
- to provide context and set the scene for decisions or actions to be undertaken in the future;
- to contribute to the creation of the narrative for change in an interesting and often fun event in real time;
- to illustrate the separate and shared histories of entities during a merger or acquisition;
- to reframe current events within the community or organization in light of past events;
- to expand the frame of reference of an organization or community to include larger, societal factors that have impacted the organization;
- to integrate members who are new to the community or organization by including participants who have longer standing in the system;

- to help build trust among all participants by conducting the event openly, transparently, and in real time for all to observe and contribute to.

Similar to the Argument of Obviousness exercise, there are a number of advantages with this activity: (1) it is simple and easy to set up; (2) it relies upon pairs and trios to do the work; (3) no specialized knowledge or tools are required, so everyone can readily contribute; (4) everyone has something to contribute; (5) there are no group reports; and (6) the group often surprises itself with its output and results. Given the pull of this activity, a drawback is that the room typically gets noisy when pairs are talking.

The Exercise

- Intended audience: anyone/everyone in an organization or event where a shared understanding of the history and context, built from the bottom up, is important.
- Duration: 40–90 minutes, depending upon the number of decades and the number of participants.
- Exercise preparation (materials, room set-up, pre-work for participants, and so on): this activity requires one page of chart paper for each decade under discussion, markers to write on the chart paper, and enough flipchart stands or wall space to accommodate the hanging of the chart pages. Participants can be seated at tables or theater style.

Instructions for facilitators
This activity is a high energy, fast paced way to get all voices into the room. Instructions for facilitators are:

1. Select the decades to explore, and write each decade on a separate piece of chart paper. At a recent session on the field of organization development (OD), for example, charts were created for 1890, 1900, 1910 . . . through 2010. The selection of the decades should be a reflection of the history of the organization and the political, economic, social, and technical factors that might have preceded the establishment of the organization.
2. Once a chart page is created for each decade, post the decade chart papers on the walls in sequence from earliest to latest.
3. Recruit volunteer scribes to chart each decade.
4. Recruit a volunteer scribe to record on a projected computer screen the themes that emerge from the review of the decades.

5. Briefly explain the purpose of the exercise. Much of the benefit comes from the group's surprise at what they have developed, so overexplaining what you hope to accomplish will short-change that benefit.
6. Keep the instructions brief; get participants into the conversation quickly; collect their comments for the decade pages and plenary discussion quickly; keep the energy level and pace high.

Exercise description and instructions for participants

Participants are directed to notice the decade pages on the walls, and told that they will generate the content for each. In the first round, participants are invited to speak with a partner, together selecting a decade in which they have a mutual interest, and identifying a few key facts or events that occurred during that decade. After 5–6 minutes, scribes are asked to stand near their decade page. One at a time, participants are invited to call out their decade and event(s), which are quickly written down. Most of the content will likely focus on the more recent decades. Duration: 10–15 minutes.

In the second round, participants are still in plenary. Starting with the earliest decade, the volunteers who have recorded the items call out to the room what is recorded on their flipchart. Once the content of each flipchart has been reviewed, ask all participants to call out additional facts or events that occurred during that decade, for recording on the flipcharts. Most times, participants will identify events or factors from history that have been overlooked. It also is helpful if the facilitator has a few key facts or events relevant to the organization or the historical period to add for each decade, in case they are not mentioned by the participants. It is important to keep the pace and energy level high. Duration: depending upon the number of decades and people, this can take 10–30 minutes.

In the third round, once the charts are full or time has expired, invite the participants to review all of the content, either from their seats or via a gallery walk among the decade charts, and to look for themes. A common question is, "Are there any topics or themes that carry over across decades that stand out for you?" Still in plenary, participants call out themes that they have identified, which are recorded on a computer and projected to the full room. Typically, these themes are longer, more textual and contextual than can easily fit onto a chart page, and occasionally are the source of next-steps actions, so having them recorded in a document makes them easy to act upon. Duration: 15–20 minutes.

The wrap-up: once the themes are identified, it is often helpful to have someone in leadership, possibly someone who has been around a longer time, summarize the main messages that they take out of the exercise, and how this effort will feed into another phase of the organizational change.

The objectives of this activity are to engage the whole system, to complement other components of the change effort, and to establish a commonly held set of facts for moving forward. Even though this event may be central to an overall change program in the organization, its purpose and intention go more toward community-building than project management, so there are often few if any direct, actionable tasks that come out of it; but if there are, it is helpful to call out specific actions that will occur as a result.

Debrief for participants

Remembering that the goal of this exercise is to have a light, fun way to build community and a common world view about the organization by sharing key facts and events in the organization's history, there are some questions to consider offering to the group once the activity is over, including, "In this exercise, . . .":

- What key or pivotal events that were discussed here stand out or made a significant impression on you, and why?
- Watching the organization participate in this process, does the organization appear in a different light to you? If so, how?
- What did you learn about the people or groups in the organization that you didn't already know?
- Was there anything you heard that was particularly interesting?
- What about what you heard did you find particularly interesting? Funny? Accurate? Completely wrong?

If time is short, these questions can be asked in plenary in 5–10 minutes. If there is more time, these questions can be worked at each table, and potentially in each group.

Variations and Other Advice on Running the Exercise

During the first round, an option is to have participants write down their contributions on index cards instead of speaking with a partner. Once they have written their contributions on index cards, they would walk up to the decades poster and tape the cards directly onto the poster. Similar to the Argument of Obviousness exercise, this variation creates a need for a gallery walk, or some method for all in the room to see and understand the content of all of the decade posters, before moving on in the exercise. In the second round, it is an option to have the facilitator call out the content on each flipchart rather than the individual chart recorders. In the third round, an option is to return participants to pairs to identify cross-cutting themes and call them out. Finally, in the wrap-up phase, a new member of

the organization could also have a unique perspective on the data generated in this exercise, with the potential of offering an alternative view about the meaning of the themes and the potential actions the themes might suggest.

Final Thoughts

This activity excels at getting all participants engaged in a simple but meaningful task, with very little explanation or time needed up front. It helps to generate a jointly held, shared narrative with key highlights from the history of the community or organization. It highlights key factors in the external environment, such as political, economic, societal, and technological factors that were and may still be a force in effecting the work of the community or organization. It is also an excellent method for integrating new members into the system and acculturating them quickly around the key events and personalities that have preceded them. A common perspective on the organization and the world is a valuable prerequisite to successful joint action. Dealing in Decades helps to achieve that in real time in front of, and by, all concerned.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In a merger, acquisition, or internal reorganization, it is not the lines and boxes on the organization chart that are the hardest obstacles to success; it is winning the hearts and minds of those affected and gaining their trust, which is often the hardest part of successful change programs. In different and complementary ways, these two activities help to do that.

The Argument of Obviousness relies upon the myths and stereotypes that we create and carry about "the other," particularly when we are challenged or threatened by organizational change. It explores those myths and stereotypes, and invites them into full view in a light and entertaining way, poking fun at "the other" and at the owners for creating them. By getting these beliefs and assumptions out on the table, both sides can see and make light of what they are saying about each other as a first step toward moving into a cooperative and collaborative stance together.

Dealing in Decades helps to build the common ground and shared perspective among those affected that is necessary for organizational alignment and concerted action. It intervenes on that most challenging variable, the narrative. Change agents work tirelessly on how to create the narrative that will persuade people to enroll in the desired change, with posters, signs, messages, and presentations drafted for senior management, focus groups, training sessions, and so on. Dealing in Decades complements all

of those activities by bringing together some or all parts of the system to create jointly the pivot point between a past that is now better understood by all, and the new future the change is intended to achieve.

Finally, the keystone of any successful organization undergoing change, or even in steady state, is trust, and the ability of those in the system to accept and believe what others say and commit to. Both of these activities, by virtue of their here-and-now designs and inclusive approaches, contribute to the difficult conversations that so often prevent the common understanding, shared perspective, and actionable trust required for human beings to work together.

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