The Tavistock and Portman
Leaders in mental health care and education

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BOOK CHAPTER

The Tavistock and Portman **NHS**
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Democratising Strategy: Towards Distributed Leadership

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Introduction

This chapter describes an intervention that aimed to take a radically inclusive approach to strategic planning in an organization in the education sector in UK. The intervention aimed to maximize participation in the strategic process and through this process help to build a culture that was emancipatory; a culture where employees had increasing agency to influence change. To achieve this, my client and I set out to engage the whole system and to encourage a holistic and connected appreciation of the organization. Finally, the aim was to take a spatial look at the organizational architecture and create new 'thinking spaces' that would become internalized and part of the culture for the future.

The Systemic Theory that influenced my Approach

My approach to this particular intervention draws on two sources;

1. Structural family therapy theory and practice

1)2. A historical systemic perspective on the Quakers' use of dispersed leadership and emergent strategy(Western 2005).

1. *Structural family therapy*

As a family therapist working in the 1980s and 1990s, I was heavily influenced by the ideas of Salvador Minuchin and structural family therapy (Minuchin 1974). Now that I am Director of Coaching at Lancaster University, I have been teaching a systemic coaching module and draw upon structural family therapy theory and practice to describe how to apply systems theory into coaching practice. Systems thinking has been applied to management thinking and practice for some time with Peter Senge being its most prominent

figure (Senge 1990). However, Senge has his critics who highlight some of the more general challenges for systems thinking.   For example, Senge's work idealizes community and over-plays the importance of dialogue without adequately addressing power (Coopey 1995).   Power is structurally hidden within discourses and normative assumptions, behaviours and organizational culture. Dialogue alone does not challenge the power elites that will continue to replicate existing norms; for example, all male boardrooms. Other criticisms of his work are that it reads well but is not easily translated into practice (partly due to the power critique), nor is there evidence that his writing has had a great impact in the field (Fielding 2001, Frank 2001).

In an attempt to address these criticisms, I draw on the experience of how structural family therapists managed to use systemic theory in practice and confronted head- on issues of power imbalances, for example within slum settings, and how this impacted on families (Minuchin 1974). Structural family therapy brings a coherent theoretical framework that arose from practice.

If one part of the system presents as dysfunctional, for example if an individual is anorexic, the therapist tries to understand how different parts of the system interact to maintain the state of equilibrium that keeps the individual anorexic. This contrasts with a medical model of simply treating the individual as a medical or psychological problem. The systems explored are multiple; the individual's biological and psychodynamic system; the extended family psychological and social systems; and the other social systems (schools, neighbors, friends) that interact and maintain stasis. Each individual/family in therapy must be understood as unique and '*situated*' within a network of systems of action and influence. It is the therapist's work to unravel this network and restructure it in a functional way through working with the family. There are no universal rules, only ways of exploring each system with the family drawing on its own resources. Minuchin and Fishman(1981) counselled against the dangers of a technique driven theory of family therapy:

If the therapist becomes wedded to technique, remaining a craftsman, his contact with patients will be objective, detached, and clean, but also superficial [and] manipulative for the sake of personal power, and ultimately not highly effective. (Minuchin and Fishman 1981 p1)

There is a symbiotic relationship between the family and therapist, whereby the therapist joins the family system and becomes like a 'distant relative' in the work of changing the system to enable new patterns to emerge.

A particular structural issue is the spatial element in family dynamics, for example enmeshment (over-involvement) and disengagement (avoiding emotional contact). All families and their subsystems move between either one of these extremes, and, if they go too far, they become stuck and unable to resolve conflict or adapt to change. If a family presents with a rigid family structure, it might be too tightly organized and enmeshed in its emotional ties. An individual may then fight for some autonomy by controlling their bodyweight, as it seems to be their last refuge of independence. The therapist's role would be to 'unbalance' the family system and 'destructure the rigid boundaries before restructuring takes place' (Goldenberg and Goldenberg 1996 p190), allowing autonomy to be gained in other, less destructive ways.

The structural family therapist also focuses on hierarchy and power relationships, establishing generational boundaries, for example ensuring parents take on appropriate parental role, and that the grandparents do not undermine this by keeping them in their child roles. In essence, structural family therapy focuses on changing a system through changing the structures of the system. For example, in a session a married couple may be asked to move their seating positions, if they are sitting apart, to sit next to each other before announcing to their children new boundaries they have decided upon. In this way, parental

strength and unity are enacted in the present. Healthy families are considered to be those that can be flexible to social changes and that self-regulate and adapt to lifecycle developments, for example the transition from childhood to teenage years and leaving home .

> *Family therapy uses techniques that alters the immediate context of people in such a way that their positions change. By changing the relationship between a person and the familiar context in which he functions, one changes his subjective experience.*
> (Minuchin 1974 p11)

This mirrors an organizational need to be adaptive to similar environmental and organizational life-cycle changes. Organizations that present as enmeshed become inward looking, self-obsessed and take their eye off their primary task and the external world. Whereas, within disengaged organizations, departments form rigid boundaries around functions, departments and professions. They can lack a healthy culture of open communication, losing the emotional glue that binds an organization together, thus preventing what Senge called the 'learning organization' (Senge 1990). Structural family therapy offers a conceptual model that can be translated to organizational systems and, more importantly, offers managers, facilitators and consultants well-researched and practiced interventions that can be translated to work systems.

I like this systemic model as engages with structure and spatial elements and also offers an account of power and authority which is lacking in many systems approaches. Space, connectivity, structure and power are elements that underpin much of my work as an organizational consultant.

2. A historical systemic perspective on the Quakers' use of dispersed leadership and emergent strategy

Historical perspectives are lacking in management literature (Burrell 1997) and yet they illuminate organisational behaviour in new ways (Case and Gosling 2007). I was influenced in this consultancy work by my PhD research that focused on the Quaker egalitarian movement that had survived for over 350 years without formal and hierarchical leadership but utilized informal and dispersed leadership, based on a model of spiritual consensus. The longitudinal study of the Quakers showed how specific organizational spaces that emerged at their conception were institutionalized in their organizational structure, enabling emergent strategy and dispersed leadership to thrive.

Box 1. This description outlines some of the important aspects of Quaker history relevant to this work (for further reading see (Dandelion 2007, Gwyn 1984, Western 2005)

Box 1. Quaker Organization

The Quakers' focus is on spiritual experience rather than on outward liturgy, church rituals or trusting biblical 'truth' as other puritans of their time did:

> *They believed the bible had to be tested against the 'truth within'; that the scriptures came secondary to one's own experience of the light* (Western 2005 p337)

The Quakers' testimonies (core values) are Simplicity, Equality, Pacifism, and Truth.

> *Believing in a 'priesthood of all believers' they (Quakers) were against the 'hireling priests' of the established church believing its rituals such as baptism and communion were outward rituals of the world and it was the inner communion with Christ and the inner baptism of the spirit which really mattered.* (Western 2005 p338)

This meant that there was no appointed priesthood or official church hierarchy but that all

members were able to take up the role of priest.   This is often described as a leaderless organization whereas the reality is that the Quakers are an early example of a 'leaderful' (Starhawk 1986) movement, encouraging a radical democratizing of leadership.   In the 1650s they were social radicals who challenged privilege and power, especially the dominant powerful church, social standing and gender.   They enacted the 'New Jerusalem' they sought in the form and structures of their new social movement and through their identity. They dressed in plain clothes, refused to doff their hats to those of higher social orders, refused to swear oaths in courts (as they claimed that truthfulness was part of everyday life, not something to be done on special occasions). Women broke gender roles and preached at open meeting and were activists throughout the organization (this was unheard of at the time even amongst radicals such as the Levellers'). Margaret Fell a prominent Quaker wrote this Public pamphlet in the late 17th Century;

> *Those that speak against the power of the Lord speaking in a woman, simply by reason of her sex, or because she is a woman, not regarding the spirit…such speak against Christ*. (Trevett 1995 p57)

Each time a Quaker walked the street, went to court or entered a church, they sign-posted an inversion of, and a confrontational challenge to, society's social norms and conventions that supported the existing power structures (Western 2005).

 The Quakers also refused to have a creed (or statement) of belief, which meant that theirs is a faith that is under constant review and is tested against the experience of the individual and discerned against the group. This creates a dynamic relationship between Quaker values and tradition, and contemporary social norms. The truth becomes generative and narrative, paradoxically constrained by tradition and conservatism, but liberated by a lack of a written creedal beliefs, which forced each generation to work on what 'the truth' meant for their organization and for society as a whole. The Quakers provided an early and unusually sustainable example of dispersed leadership, decisions were/are made at their business

> meetings through spiritual consensus, rather than voting or through an elected leadership body.

My research identified how The Quakers had negotiated social change and survived over a three hundred year period despite widespread persecution when most of the egalitarian and utopian social movements in the mid 17th Century disappeared. My findings were that the Quakers had survived not through visionary transformational leadership,which was apparent at the outset then faded in the second generation, but through the containing organizational structures and form of their worship and business meetings.

It was the 'paternal structure' of the organization, or its form, that provided the reflective 'maternal spaces' necessary that enabled emergent strategy to arise from within the ranks of the organization and thus enabled adaptation to social change (Western 2007). This liminal and counter-cultural space (Pilgrim 2004) created by Quaker meetings for worship is formally structured with minimal distractions. Instead of music, ritual or spoken liturgy, there is silence and listening to the inner self and to the group. This is an egalitarian space, open to anyone present to 'minister' (stand and speak) if 'moved by the spirit' to do so. What is created is a space for reflection, for ideas and thoughts to emerge as well as group discernment at business meetings using similar structures. This echoes with what Keats (1970) called 'negative capability', the capacity to think and reflect without grasping for immediate solutions:

> '*when a man is capable of being in uncertainties,mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason*' (Keats, 1970 p 43);

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At times of crisis for their organization and during social change, local meetings for worship acted as 'containers for anxiety' and places for 'negative capability'. This enabled the Quakers to change corporate direction and adapt to social change or conversely to get society to adapt to their discerned 'truths'. For example, the Quakers banned slavery in their own community 100 years prior to Wilberforce's campaign and were activists throughout this period to ban slavery in general.

In my consultancy practice, I use the concept of paternal and maternal containment that are psychoanalytic terms linked to human development (drawing on Bion 1962, Lacan 1958, Klein 1959, Western 2007). 'Paternal containment' refers to structure, to form, to the external and to what Freud called the reality principle. A good structure creates a secure container that is a pre-requisite for thinking, creativity, risk and play.

> *First, as Anna Freud says, build the house; first, as Klein says, introject the good breast; first as Bion says, you have to have an adequate container; first, as Bowlby says, have a secure base.* (Alvarez 1992 p117)

' Maternal containment' is the unconscious emotional state that allows an infant to feel secure, play, think and make sense of its own experience and to learn. I use these terms to describe how organizational spaces/structures create conscious and unconscious group processes that enhance or diminish learning and creativity. A huge influence in the consulting project has been the understanding of how containing spaces in organizations enable emergent strategy and dispersed leadership to be enacted.

Case Study: Democratizing Strategy

Background

This intervention emerged from my coaching relationship with Chief Executive (CEO) of the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL), an organization that was established to deliver leadership excellence in the Further Education and Learning and Skills sector in UK. CEL was set up as a partner-based organization with three key players; two were University Business and Management Schools and another a public sector body from the Learning and Skills sector. The remit was to raise standards by delivering leadership development supported by research. This partner-based relationship was problematic from the outset, as are many partnership and collaborative enterprises, due to challenging contracting issues that created tensions over resources, clarity of roles and diverse organizational cultures coming together.   After working from one of the provider organizations in the first year and witnessing some of the challenges, I was asked by the CEO from CEL to become her personal leadership coach. The aims of this coaching relationship were initially to act as a sounding board and thinking partner to help her lead this new, ill-defined and complex organization.

In the early coaching sessions with the CEO, we spent time drawing network maps of the system and the relationships, and also personal maps of how she saw herself in the organization. We worked hard and fast, bouncing ideas around, and discussing how her leadership style and assumptions needed to adapt to lead this new organizational structure. She described her leadership style, which had been successful thus far leading Further Education Colleges, as a dynamo type leader, a catalyst for the organization at the centre of everything. She realized that to lead a partnership organization was a new challenge. Rather than being a dynamo at the centre, what was required was a new

leadership approach that enabled leadership to be distributed throughout the organization. We worked on personal depth issues, how she managed her leadership role and the projections from others. In parallel we worked on the strategic and structural issues of the system. We agreed that the leadership task was to create the structures and culture to allow CEL as an organization develop itself through entrepreneurial activity and to deliver at local levels whilst having a collective identity and common processes and branding. After coming up with 'a picture' that represented the organizational architecture that could deliver some of the desired structural changes, the CEO then began to implement them.

We then turned our efforts to think about the organizational culture and we agreed with Heifetz & Laurie (1997) believing that the talent was within the organization but the culture and structures needed to emancipate it:

> *Organisations rarely lack talented individuals, but they do frequently fail to bring those talents together to create a powerful collective force. In part this is due to the old-fashioned thinking that progress is only made when we have a 'leader with vision' who can show us the way. This persistent image damages the collective capacity to do better things.* (Heifetz, R. & Laurie, D. 1997 p126)

Strategic Forums

It was at this stage, as we looked at innovative ways to change the organizational culture, that we discussed and drew upon my PhD research on leadership and the Quaker movement. The CEO and I decided to try learn from and simulate aspects of the Quaker success in CEL. Our aim was to create spaces in the organizational architecture, or paternal containment, that would provide structures to open up a 'maternal space' for creativity, emergent strategy and dispersed leadership. I was given the opportunity to move beyond my role as coach, whilst also maintaining it, to design and facilitate the delivery of this

process.

This intervention had two key aims:

1. To democratize strategy by creating a radically inclusive strategic process that, as a by-product, would create opportunities for more distributed leadership.

2. To create an organizational form that allowed creativity, communication and emergent ideas to flow from all parts of the organization.

We started with a modest idea to invite project leaders to participate in an open but structured process that we called a Strategic Forum. The idea was to engage a wider group than the CEO and senior management team to think strategically and take leadership initiatives.

Stage One: Project Leaders' Strategic Forum

The first Strategic Forum was held for those who led projects throughout CEL. We were explicit about our aim:

To democratise the strategic process by providing containing spaces within the organisational architecture to enable networking, open communication and creativity to flourish.

The Strategic Forum was structured and facilitated to :

- Resist the rush to premature closure, avoiding problem solving approaches

- Free the participants from the responsibility of coming up with strategic plans

- To avoid generating impotence, and becoming stuck in the boggy lowlands of 'negative thinking' whilst at the same time encouraging 'truthful engagement'.

To achieve this the forum had a design that attempted to mirror the outcomes desired:

1) Space to (non)think

2) Space to connect, communicate and to network.

3) Space to be creative.

4) Activities that 'unbalanced' and deconstructed normative responses.

My role as facilitator closely mirrored the role of structural family therapist. To join the system, as a 'distant relative': I was known to many in the organization but not part of it. I would be a part of the system but distant enough to ask the difficult and naïve questions. The CEO attended at the beginning of the Forum to legitimize it but did not attend through the event as we thought this would free people up .

After an evening of 'joining' in which the group came together, we then moved into a 'Free Association Matrix' (Lawrence 2000, Western 2007). This creates a space in which chairs are set out in an ad hoc jumbled fashion and participants are encouraged to sit in silence and then to 'free associate' their thoughts and pre-occupations. This has the impact of 'denaturalizing' a space, so that it becomes possible to 'look awry' at the organization, and to tap into the unconscious. It has some similar qualities to the Quaker meeting. Here are a few examples to give a flavour of the free associations spoken in this session. As you will see, this exercise releases ad hoc ideas that are later worked upon:

Box 2   Individuals speaking in the Free Association Matrix

'CEL is a honeycomb that needs to be full of honey – has infrastructure already so people will come to it'

Don't be what others expect us to be

'Create a sense of identity…..we lost ours when we joined CEL'
'Identity relies on expertise'
'Create identity that we can live with – this is very hard as we are all from different seconded organizations with strong identities of their own'

'Be aware of what we don't know'
'Don't be afraid of being experts' 'What is our expertise?'

> *'Promote our learning…….'*
> *' Unlearning is most important'*
>
> *'We should be called the Centre for <u>un</u>learning leadership'*
>
> *'Call ourselves Centre for Energy in Leadership'*
>
> *'Is there a paradox between knowing and not knowing?'*
> *'CEL can say it's alright not to know'*
> *'Blend vision, commitment, heart'*

We followed the free associations with a small group peer consultancy exercise to work on the themes that had emerged from the free associations, one of which was the identity of the whole organisation.

The small group conversations shifted the atmosphere dramatically . We had reached the emotional underbelly of how people had experienced the early months of this new organization. Trust had been built and individuals were prepared to share their feelings. There was a feeling that mistakes had been made. People described feeling a sense of loss as they were separated from their seconded institutions, and yet, in their new organization, it felt a little out of control. The partnerships were tense, often distrustful and individuals working on the front line felt the pain of this acutely. The way the new organization had been structured meant that the internal partners were competing over resources with little to reward collaboration. Senior leaders acknowledged this pain and this released a lot of pent up angst.

Powerful bonding was produced through the acknowledgement of mistakes, painful relationships and of how they had all tenaciously stuck at the difficult task to survive and produce successful results, in spite of the difficulties. CEL was only in its first year and

the focus had been on survival but now they could begin to build an improved culture. This led to a useful final session in the Forum in which questions of identity, community and creating a culture where communication and risk taking and having the agency to act were strongly featured.

Box 3.   Discussion Points at the Plenary of the Project Leaders Forum

Alignment

- *How do we go from 'us and them' to 'us and us'?*

- *Sense of purpose/belonging/ownership*

- *Community of communities*

- *Collective identity*

- *How are we a strategic force?*

- *How do we ensure operational delivery*?

What are the catalysts for Change?

Permission: Taking our own authority and acting on it.

Quality Improvement, Confidence, Relationships

Skills development, No-blame culture (learn from failures)

Competence, Capability, moving out of comfort zones

Final Reflections

Group felt like a breakthrough – very energetic, articulate

If we can be the catalyst for this there will be the dawning of a new era

Maybe we have missed basic things; we need to go back to core basics and review where we failed – Be humble

More joining up can be done to fit a strategic picture

> *How do we manage the vast knowledge we have got?*
>
> *Today has generated so much, there is not enough cross-fertilisation*
>
> *To be strategic will involve everyone*

The first emergent strategic decision from this Forum, was to decide,with the support of the CEO, that the Strategic Forums were so important that they should be made available to all staff.   This was quite unexpected and exceeded our expectations.   It was an enactment or bringing to life of the organization form we had discussed while planning the Strategic Forums.   The thinking was that this forum and 'space to think' was not just useful in itself but would be an essential part of building a strong networked culture, and would encourage improved communication across the organizational boundaries and help manifest the dispersed leadership we were attempting to achieve.

Stage Two: Radical Inclusion

We invited four staff groups to attend the Strategic Forums in job specific groups:

Programme Delivery, Project Leaders, Central and Support staff, and Research and Evaluation.   Three of these groups attended whilst the fourth group, Research and Evaluation, was undergoing huge changes and facing deadlines before its contractual time with CEL was coming to an end.   This meant that we didn't manage to get this fragmented 'group' to attend.

I designed each of the three Strategic Forums differently but with the same aims and basic structure. Again the CEO was present at the end of each one.

- The first task of the strategy forum was cross-fertilising information.

- The second task was to create a new space from which open communication and new thinking could occur.

- The third task was for the Forum to offer content, some ideas that would contribute to the emerging strategy.

We made it clear that the work was not to create a strategic plan but to provide the groundwork for new strategies to emerge, that is using 'negative capability'.

The structure of each forum was an evening and a day with space for reflection, communication and cross-fertilisation of ideas. We tried to encourage the idea that, whatever role individuals and teams played, their contribution was valuable and their ideas could make a difference that mattered. Box 4. shows two examples of systemic activities I used to promote this thinking.

Box 4. – Systemic Activities

Systems Game

This game is to demonstrate systemic and self-organising/regulating principles. Two members of the group stand outside as the instructions are given to the rest of the group in a large empty room.

Instructions:

- Choose two people in the room without them knowing you have done so

- When the game begins each person moves and keeps moving to create an equi-distance of space between themselves and the two chosen others (this is not in-between the two people but triangulated with equal distance between all three of you).

When the movement begins the two outsiders come in and observe what is happening and

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are asked to describe what they see and think is happening at the end of the exercise.

The game continues for approximately 10 minutes.

What is created is a self-regulating system where small changes amplify creating bigger changes. The movement slows and speeds up with its own momentum and patterns emerge from what initially feels chaotic.

As one participant who held an administrative role said afterwards *"This game showed me that even I can make a difference, it really hit me that we are all part of something but all rely on each other"*

Another offered: *"It is really strange how we all slowed down but didn't stop, then I moved a bit faster and everyone moved; I felt powerful!"*

We summarised this exercise thus:

- *Shift focus from self to focus on relationships:*
- *Self-organising/regulating principles.*
- *External influences force adaptive behaviour by organisations.*
- *What looks like chaos is not always chaos, there can be self-managing systems in place.*
- *Constant change is needed to maintain stability.*
- *Just because you don't know or understand, doesn't mean it isn't working.*
- *Every action has a reaction.*
- *Small things do make a change in the system.*
- *CEL is a self-regulating mechanism. To stay the same (equilibrium) an organisation has to be in a constant state of flux/change.*

Network Mapping

This exercise is based on structural family therapy technique (Minuchin 1974)

that I have adapted and used with great success in organisations. People using flip charts

draw organisational maps using the symbols below to show how they (and their

department/team) relate to other individuals <u>and</u> social groups, for example 'the board'

the 'finance department' or even an abstract group 'the customers' or a government agency.

Mapping Symbols

Distant	**Estranged or cut off**
Very close or fused	**Fused and conflictual**
Poor or conflictual	**Close**
Weak Group	**Powerful Group**
Creative	**Working Relationship**

At the centre of these maps I ask individuals to make a plasticine effigy which symbolises themselves. They then partner up and coach each other on their drawn networks and the effigy can be moved to different parts of the system, to look at the map and to see the system from others' perspectives.

The maps are then put onto the walls and people can walk around a gallery .. A number of views and artistic impressions of the system emerge. Power and communication are key themes that arise from this activity.

Some comments that were made are:

Heightened awareness of relationships

Good to understand how relationships work
Perception of relationship is important
Closest you work with is where most of the conflict and creativity arises
Two people in the same office have different maps: the lesson is not to assume everyone sees world as we do.

Structural issues

No senior managers appeared on some maps suggesting a distance and lack of direction from above?
Interestingly 70% of delivery is done by external consultants and yet they do not appear on the maps!
Maps say something about individuals and also about the organisation.
Not clear what each other's roles are – expand on job title to make it clear what everyone does.

Communications

Communications improving
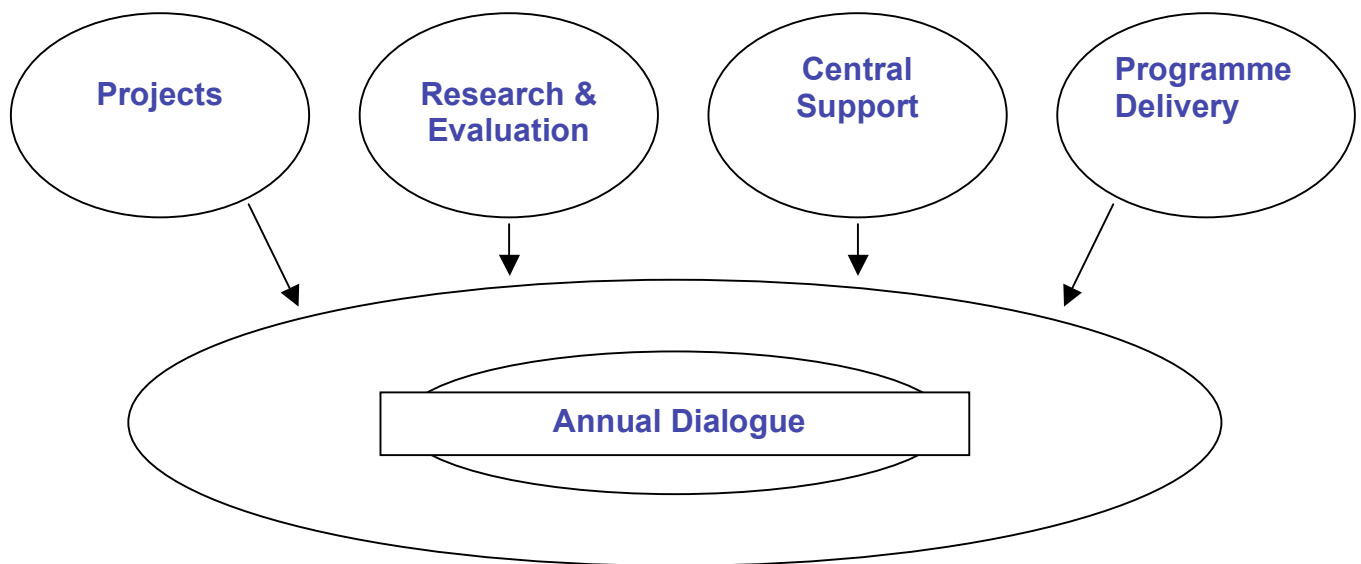*Location less of an issue than it used to be although visiting other sites still important.*

The overall structure of the Strategic Forums as well as these activities were aimed at engaging individuals and teams to reflect on the interconnected nature of the workplace, the potential for improved communication, and the impact on the wider system of sharing information and making changes in one part it. Individuals and groups shared practical ideas on how to improve operational performance and strategic initiatives were widely supported, such as moving forward with an intranet to manage communication across CEL.

Stage Three: The Whole System

When working as a family therapist, I realised the power of the extended family meeting . This physical face-to-face meeting, called to discuss some painful issues, somehow created a 'witnessing' and acknowledgment of the issues and of the family bond that went beyond words. The Quakers too have an annual general meeting when the whole comes together and it is a powerful experience, with up to 1000 Quakers making policy decisions through spiritual consensus.

The Strategic Forum design was to hold three separate forums and then bring these together at the annual staff day or dialogue, replicating the whole system, and which the CEO attended throughout.

This diagram shows how the Strategic Forums took place in different groups and then met as a whole system once a year. (The Research & Evaluation forum didn't take place)

Projects

Research & Evaluation

Central Support

Programme Delivery

Annual Dialogue

As organizations grow and the boundaries blur as to where the organization starts and ends, it becomes important to find virtual ways to affirm collective identity.   At the Annual Dialogue, each group was keen to share some of their experience.   One group, led by a couple of dissatisfied staff, slipped into blame culture, but the whole group

managed this in a mature way. A discussion on respect followed, and it was acknowledged that a culture of respect needed nurturing, as at times the administration staff, in particular, felt that communications, email and verbal, at times lacked respect. The sense of a more empowered group was in the room. Again we did the systems game, enacting once more for the whole group, how they are all connected and inter-dependant in a fun way.

Assessment

Our aim with this intervention was to introduce into CEL a form and structure that both acted as a signifier and a conduit of change. It simultaneously provided *physical spaces* that would encourage openness and creativity as well as distributing leadership. Employees could engage and partake in strategic thinking and, in doing this, could subvert a hierarchical and dependent culture that was getting in the way of change and collaboration.

From a systemic perspective, this idea works on the premise that leadership is not the property of a single individual, or a hierarchical concept but exists within an organizational and social ecology (see Western 2007 The Eco-leader Discourse). I was also bringing psychoanalytic theory together with my family systems background. In approaching this work in the way that I did. I drew on the theory of paternal and maternal containers to create spaces in the organizational architecture, thereby structurally changing the system in order to stimulate further change. I learned from the Quakers' experience of creating such spaces and allowing/trusting in dispersed leadership and emergent strategy, rather than feeling under pressure to conform to social norms and become another hierarchical organization. My experience of structural family therapy

helped me to acknowledge and consider power relations in the attempt to encourage distributed leadership, as this will not work if the issue of power is ignored.   It was important to bring the CEO to these forums at the beginning or the end, not to dominate the meetings, but to legitimize them and engage openly and frankly in discussion. At the Annual Dialogue, the CEO made an honest and soul-bearing comment on feedback she had received about her leadership style, and how she, like others, was working hard to make changes in order to further change the organizational culture . This was 'signifying leadership' at its best and brought power into the open so it was available for debate and negotiation.

I have identified three key themes that were highlighted as benefits at the Annual Dialogue:

- *Distributed leadership*

This went beyond rhetoric as change initiatives were suggested from all parts of the organisation, some of the best coming from administrative staff. Together these form an emergent strategy, particularly in relation to improving processes, communication and sustaining social networks

- *Identifying what is sustainable success: Short and long term goals*

There was a shift from the struggle for survival and reactive management, to being able to consider a strategic future. This was the biggest success produced by the intervention.

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- *Designing and adapting business models which work for the whole of CEL*

Structural and process decisions were made that addressed CEL as a whole rather than individual parts . It was very rewarding for me to watch people think and talk in their own language about the whole system and connectivity.

CEL has been very successful as an organization and has over achieved its delivery targets, as well as becoming a much less frenetic and fragmented place. It was evaluated as follows:

> *By 31 March 2007, less than four years after its launch, the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) had recruited nearly 26,000 individual participants and worked with 91 per cent of the organisations in the further education system. CEL's annual review, published today, also shows that 12,000 participants were recruited during the financial year to 31 March 2007, exceeding the target by 46 per cent, and that customer satisfaction had improved again, with 96 per cent of participants rating CEL's programmes, courses or events as good or very good.*

www.centreforexcellence.org.uk July 13, 2007

Internal communication has improved through the implementation of an intranet and staff bulletins. Leadership has been distributed, for example groups of self-appointed staff now organize the annual away days which are popular and fun.. There are also improved systems of internal appraisal with a new incentive scheme for all staff. Structurally there have been major changes, with newly appointed directors further dispersing leadership from central control to those closer to delivery.

The process of democratizing strategy, has supported this success and been one of many factors rather than the sole causal factor.

Conclusions and Discussion

It is always a challenge to persuade senior management in an organization to commit to a process like this in a world of controlling costs and functionalist thinking. This is because:

1) It is counter- cultural and threatening to be part of a process to change the culture so as to disperse leadership and power. It is important that consultants working with this kind of intervention can contain the anxiety of leaders.

2) If such a systemic intervention is to work, it is very important to persuade HR teams and senior managers to address power issues. Whilst problematic, it is not impossible if the gains of a more transparent, communicative engaged and innovative culture can be argued for.

3) It is a skilful business to manage and facilitate these forums. They can easily become sites of blame culture particularly if the participants feel that the work is nothing but management rhetoric. Cynicism has grown since a raft of transformational leadership initiatives in the 1980s-2000 were trumpeted with prophetic fervor yet failed to deliver.

This is why the power relations in such an intervention, as well as improved dialogue, need to be addressed.

Management thinking is usually done 'ahistorically' as if the data from the contemporary era is all we have to go on. The example of a longitudinal case study of the Quakers and their use of distributed leadership and system adaptation over 350 years has inspired my own work. I would encourage other consultants and leaders to explore the history of systems and movements as opposed to a history of individual hero leaders.

4)
Finally, it is my belief that a key leadership task is to liberate strategy and totalising power from the manacles of the boardroom. This is because we are now in a context where most organisations, not just CEL, will not survive without effective partnership working and ways of motivating and inspiring staff by including them in decision-making. Leaders will need to create a reflexive system enabling strategy to be aligned with an organisational culture that maximises participation. It will increasingly be the task of systemic consultants and managers to find ways to support others to help make this happen.

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