

Fishing with Maui: Working with Depth Issues in Management Consulting

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Title

Fishing with Maui: Working with depth issues in management consulting

Author and presenter

T. Martin Ringer: Martin Ringer Consulting
Socio-systemic management consultant

Abstract

Maui had the courage to fish for what was unknown and what was at the same time forbidden. He surfaced a great treasure and at the same time he created a lot of trouble. Most clients and most organizational psychologists are aware that there is both creativity and danger that can be discovered by directly addressing ‘depth’ issues when carrying out management consulting projects. This paper outlines the benefits and dangers of working with ‘unconscious’ and unspoken issues in organizations and suggests some principles that can assist consultants in achieving good results in the process.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to stimulate thinking about the usefulness of working ‘at depth’ with issues in organizations. By ‘depth’ I mean issues that are sometimes described as:

- Out of awareness
- Cultural
- Unconscious
- Intuitive
- Shadow
- Organisational defence systems
- Unspoken
- Hidden

A brief example of this kind of work:

I was asked to work as a consultant to an oil and gas production company and their major engineering services provider. Safety performance on a number of offshore production facilities had plummeted over a period of six months and nothing had turned the downward trend around.

Education programs, incentive, punishments, audits and reviews had all been tried. Two people had even been fired.

An early part of my intervention was to facilitate a workshop of all major stakeholders. At this workshop we agreed to work 'at depth'. This was described to participants as both "thinking outside the box" and "looking for the hidden and the unexpected." A consistent focus during the workshop on relationships and the meaning of events led to quite deep, powerful and honest observations.

Some interesting patterns emerged. These included:

- Offshore staff were constantly reminded by management how important safety was to the management and so offshore staff began to see their own safe behaviour as doing a favour for management.
- Management had recently put a number of organizational changes in place that were seen by offshore staff to jeopardize their conditions of employment. Offshore staff no longer felt emotionally safe and looked after.
- The skills and knowledge were in place to act safely but in the main offshore staff lacked an internalized picture of themselves as their own 'internal safety supervisors' who were responsible for their own safety and the safety of others around them.

The workshop began the process of building throughout the levels in the organization an understanding of the above patterns of perception and meaning-making. When these were worked with by some very competent staff, this led to a significant improvement in safety performance.

A tale of illicit fishing

Maori people used only to tell important stories to people whom they trusted to keep the integrity of the oral tradition. When you hear what I've done to the story you'd probably agree that in traditional Maori society that I would not have made it into this trusted inner circle! Whilst I jest about my possible corruption of the story, I do also want to acknowledge that I am not trying to exactly replicate the original story. My version is varied to suit the specific theme of working at depth with organizations. Accordingly I request tolerance from Maori people throughout Aotearoa.

As I tell the story I invite you to dream a little and let yourself notice any associations that this story evokes for you as a person involved in organizational psychology.

Maui was the youngest of many brothers. For years he had tolerated being humiliated by his brothers when they told him he was too young and unskilled to go fishing with

them. One morning he decided he'd had enough. He sneaked through the pre-dawn mists and hid himself under the floorboards of the waaka – the fishing canoe.

Later that morning when the brothers had paddled out to their favourite fishing spot, Maui jumped from under the floorboards and crowed “Hah, this time you can't stop me from going fishing.”

Maui's brothers were in a rage. This was not in the corporate plan! Maui was not eligible to attend fishing trips with the Executive Team. But Key Performance Indicators for the Executive meant that they did not have time to paddle all the way back to the shore to put Maui properly in his place. Furthermore the organizational values statement did not allow for the killing of insubordinates like Maui. So they all stayed and fished together.

Maui actually had a magic fishhook and, after anointing it with his own blood, he cast it into the sea to find its prey. No sooner had the line reached the bottom than Maui felt a steadily increasing pull on the line. He did not know what he had caught but it was too late to let go now.

After a huge struggle that nearly sank the canoe Maui surfaced a huge fish “Te Ika a Maui.” This fish was in fact a new land (the North Island of New Zealand). At first terrified, and then struck with greed at seeing all of this unclaimed land, the older brothers leaped out of the canoe onto the new land and carved deep troughs into it to mark out their competing claims for territory. The giant fish trembled and shook as huge mountains and volcanoes erupted. Finally it lay dead: Motionless and scarred beyond recognition but a new fertile land.

In modern time can we learn from this story that relates to working with organizations?

What are the morals?

What comes to mind for you as you listened to that story?

I chose this story because the following associations occurred to me:

1. You're not always allowed to go fishing for depth issues in organizations but that does not mean that fishing won't be useful.
2. Rules that parallel the one “young people can't go fishing” are commonly used to avoid disturbing the status quo.

(What are some of the unspoken or unchallenged rules in organizations that you work with that prevent the equilibrium from being disturbed?)

3. When Maui went fishing he knew that there was something to catch but he did not know what it was. As soon as he felt it on his line he knew it was something significant. Two morals here:
 - a. Firstly in working at depth in organizations you can't predict what you're going to surface and secondly
 - b. Once you're onto something it can be virtually impossible to pretend that it does not exist.

(What kinds of issues do you think are hidden in an organization that you work with or work for?)

(What might you do to surface one of these issues?)

4. Maui's line could represent the kind of intuitive link with the unconscious of the organization that a consultant has soon after making contact with the organization.
5. You can catch more than you can handle.

(If you surfaced one of the significant issues in your organization of interest, what could you do with it?: Could you handle it in a way that helped the organization and/you?)

6. What happens to what you catch is not in your control

(Who or what do you see as being in control of the deep issues that exist in your organization of interest?)

7. What you bring to the surface will cause disturbance and chaos but out of that disturbance we can often find transformations as long as you survive long enough to ride it out.
8. Fish don't generally come to the surface unless they're caught and pulled up.
9. Pulling up the tough ones can lead to a huge release of resources and productivity.

Who can be an organizational Maui?

It's easy to think that anyone can do what Maui did but it's important to note the he was not just any average person. He had already done some good organizational work. For instance, in earlier times he had harnessed the sun and made it go slower across the sky. So he had some pretty special talents like being stronger than the sun.

We need to learn from this. Pulling up depth issues in organizations creates some major emotional and psychological challenges for the fisherperson. We need to be robust with our own emotional and unconscious processes so that we can hang in with the unknowable chaos and strong feelings that come with uncovering long-concealed issues.

Why are depth issue deep?

Western society has some sacred cows that make it difficult for people in organizations to deal with depth issues. "Deep" means significant and significant usually means emotionally loaded. Some of the sacred cows are:

1. Looking like we're in control is better than looking like we're unsure but responsive to organizational and environmental needs

Hence, for instance, meeting useless goals is seen as preferable to changing useless goals into better goals!

2. Looking and feeling confident is better than feeling curious about what might happen

Hence it's seen to be better to believe that the organization is in excellent shape than to be anxious about the future and ask intelligent questions about what is really important!

3. If people get distressed, anxious, scared or depressed then the person who 'made them feel that way' should be found and dealt with severely

Hence doubts and anxieties are not voiced and instead circulate in the organizational gossip mill. A corollary to this is that the organizational gossip mill can be the most accurate measure of the psychological health of the organization.

Organizational defense systems

Maui's brothers may have known that Te Ika a Maui was under the sea waiting to be pulled to the surface to form a rich and fertile land. Perhaps none of them knew how to catch it but they intuitively knew that Maui could surface this new land. The only way to keep themselves looking like the best fishermen in the village was to prevent Maui from going fishing. The story that Maui was too young to go fishing was a part of an organizational defense system.

Organizations have complex conscious and unconscious defense systems that resist intrusion by members of the organization or by external consultants. These defenses are not necessarily aligned with the health of the organization. Sometimes organizational defenses such as grandiosity lead to the downfall of organizations because they fail to see what they need to do in order to thrive or survive. The history of IBM remains an icon of this phenomenon.

(Does this remind you of any organizational defense systems that you've come across?)

What can we do as employees or as consultants to systems in order to work effectively with 'depth' issues?

- Use your intuition:
 - i. If feel like you're wading through treacle then you are. The treacle is at an unconscious level.
 - ii. If you know in your guts that what's being talked about is not **really** what's being talked about then you're probably right
- If your consulting or leadership is not working despite all the signs being that it should, then look deeper.
- Keep reminding yourself that what you see is not all that you get. What is said is probably said in part to conceal what is not said.
- Consultant and leaders are often asked to do what is wanted by the referring person and not necessarily what is needed by the organization

So what?

There is no panacea to working effectively at depth in organizations but having a clear understanding of your own internal emotional and psychological world is a very powerful basis to start work.

Having conceptual maps that explain unconscious processes in organizations helps too. A sound theoretical framework is both helpful for the work and essential for ethical practice.

Having a supportive peer culture that values feelings, intuition and unconscious processes is almost essential to keep one alive and well in the inevitable highs and lows of this kind of 'depth' work.

A note about references:

This is not an academic publication and so I have not included specific references to each assertion that I have made. However, I am happy to provide the titles of around a dozen relevant books and papers for the interested reader.

Author contact details

Martin Ringer Consulting

119A Ocean View Road

NORTHCOTE

Auckland

martinringer@compuserve.com

<http://www.martinringer.com>

Mobile: 021 555 463

Phone/fax: (09) 419 2075