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Title: Consulting to catastrophic breakdown in inter-team relationships: Using an "opinion bubbles" framework.

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Abstract

When inter-team relationships suffer a catastrophic breakdown any consultant who attempts to ameliorate the dysfunction does so at his/her peril because of the high levels of hostility, disappointment and antagonism, and hence projection present in the system. To be effective, a consultant needs to maintain 'good-enough' neutrality and needs to be able to tolerate high levels of uncertainty and the absence of an adequate container provided by the client(s) because of the fact that those who could otherwise provide the container are in conflict with each other.

This presentation describes a model adopted by a consultant who works alone to intervene in highly conflicted systems where there is pressure for quick results and where there is low tolerance for theorizing. The model is based on systems-psychoanalytic principles that have been tested in practice and is designed to provide common language and frameworks to enable bridge-building between hostile parties.

Content

There are multiple risks in intervening in highly conflicted systems. Firstly the fact that the consultant is engaged after relationships in the client system have been severed means that there is a high risk of catastrophic failure of the client system where the primary task is lost and permanent failure of all structures, systems and relationships results. Secondly, the consultant places him/herself at very high risk of being the recipient of projected disappointment, hostility and antagonism that originates in the client system. Thirdly, the consultant needs enter into the 'truth systems' and 'dominant narratives' (Bal, 2011) of both or all parties despite their mutual exclusivity. This is a psychological and emotional risk for the consultant. Fourthly, the consultant is constantly at high risk of being seen as failing to be neutral by favouring one party and hence is at risk of being violently ejected from the consulting project.

Both this paper and the associated conference presentation address each of these risks.

Significance

The presentation addresses the omnipresent question of how consultants can be informed by systems-psychoanalytic principles whilst working in organizational environments where the clients have neither knowledge of nor tolerance of overt application of such theories. The presentation offers practical models and methodologies and is presented in language that is accessible to audiences that are not steeped in systems psychoanalytic theory.

The theme of uncertainty pervades the presentation as the situation in which the consultant enters is uncertain, is pervaded with anxiety and without any intervention could well be headed for a catastrophic end.

The model of intervention to be presented could be applied by conference participants who attend the presentation in their own work with organizations.

Introduction

This paper is about what happens when two or more[1] teams[2] or groups who are meant to be working together on a shared task reach a level of inter-team conflict that results in their losing their ability progress that task. Instead, the energy of the teams is consumed by the conflict and the associated search for 'fairness' and 'justice'.

In such cases, the negative projections of each party towards the other manifest themselves in mutually exclusive hostile story-lines. That is, the parties start to retreat into their own different but self-reinforcing narratives, each casting the other party in a bad light and their own party in a good light. There is collective collusion in projecting the 'bad' into the other group. In this paper these self-perpetuating and self-referential systems are called "opinion bubbles". Embryonic or weakly formed opinion bubbles are present throughout all organizations and communities, but often do not reach the intensity that results in failure of the social or organizational system. For example, support groups for political parties have tried-and-tested techniques for ensuring that they focus only on what is 'bad' about the other party and what is good about their own party, and hence they form embryonic opinion bubbles. Such opinion bubbles have the useful function of creating a secure 'skin' (Anzieu, 1999) around the involved group and help maintain group

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[1] For the sake of simplicity the paper is written as though there are only two parties involved but the principles also apply to multi-party disputes.

[2] The word "team" or "Teams" will be used henceforth to signify both teams and groups.

identity and the "group illusion" as per Anzieu's (1984) formulation of the concept. Low level opinion bubbles are an important part of communal and organizational life but these are outside the scope of this paper. Working overtly with the notion of opinion bubbles can be effective in helping to create high quality thinking spaces (Ringer, 2007) in situations ranging from successfully collaborative parties right through to situations involving highly entrenched conflict.

Severe opinion bubbles form in situations when one party takes another to court for transgressions against them such as fraud, theft, abuse or transgressions of rights but these parties have no requirement for an on-going relationship. Whilst many of the principles articulated in this paper can be applied to such situations, cases such as these are not the main focus of this paper. An example of the type of situation that does lie within the focus of this paper is when client/contractor relationships go badly wrong.

The paper is restricted to the type of situation where two main conditions are present:

1. There has been a complete breakdown in the working relationship between the parties, associated with the development of distinct, strong and powerful opinion bubbles
2. There is a need for the parties to continue to work together to complete the primary task that they share.

The term opinion bubble refers to a complex interdependent system that includes a coherent set of narratives, views, beliefs and values as well as the people who hold and express those views. In escalated conflict these systems become almost impermeable to change from either inside or outside the system/opinion bubble. Once such dynamics are well established, effective communication between parties ceases and hence little or no further collaborative work is done to advance the primary task. Instead, conflicted parties start to act as though their purpose in life is to destroy, eject or discredit the other party. To the observer, it appears that the affected parties start to act as if their primary task is to obtain redress or justice from the other party and they lose focus on the primary task that initially created a meaningful working relationship between the parties. The substitution of a combat-related primary task for the original primary task is taken in this paper to signify 'catastrophic breakdown' in the inter-party relationship(s). A second signifier of catastrophic breakdown is the pervasive belief amongst affected parties that without outside help they would not have the capacity to work through the conflict to regain focus on their original primary task.

Whilst it is evident to the psychodynamic practitioner that group-level splitting and projection is the fundamental dynamic that both underlies and fuels such breakdowns (Long, 2000), this observation does not directly guide an external practitioner to useful interventions.

Evidence of the existence of opinion bubbles in a conflicted system include the following elements:

- All members of an intact team or a collective tell or repeat to varying degrees anecdotes and stories[3] to others in their own team that consistently and systematically cast the other team in a bad light
- In contrast, these same people consistently tell or repeat stories and anecdotes that cast their own team in a positive light – particularly in relation to their interactions with the other team
- As each new event occurs each team makes selective attributions (Dattner & Dahl, 2011) to the meaning of each new event and hence creates new narratives that cast their own team in a good light and the other in a bad light. Evidence that could be used to undermine the dominant narrative is ignored
- Any member of these collectives who strongly challenges the correctness or usefulness of the opinions, beliefs and story-lines that circulate in his/her own collective is 'disciplined', ostracized or ejected from the collective.
- Any person from outside the conflicted system who challenges the correctness or usefulness of the opinions, beliefs and story-lines that circulate in any part of the conflicted system is discredited by the part of the system that is challenged. This creates a high level of risk for consultants
- In summary, two impermeable systems or "opinion bubbles" are created where each system has mutually exclusive beliefs, opinions, views, narratives and feelings about the other, sometimes to the point that effective communication between the conflicted parties almost ceases. The behaviour of both collectives in relation to each other tends strongly towards the paranoid-schizoid (Volkan, 2004). Any person such as a consultant who seeks to work with such a system is at risk of being violently ejected if he/she challenges the dominant narratives of any or either of the opinion bubbles.

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[3] The word "story" does not imply in any way that what is spoken about is intentionally fabricated, false or fictive. A story is similar to an anecdote but often contains a number of related anecdotes strung together in a coherent fashion.

In such cases, facilitation of combined groups is unlikely to be successful in breaking the deadlock until some permeability has been created in each opinion bubble and the level of collective projection reduced. The introduction of a neutral facilitative consultant as a means of working with catastrophic breakdown in work place relationships is described later in this paper.

Summary

Opinion bubbles –

- Form in response to a real or perceived threat to power, resources, self-esteem etc.
- Contain opinions, views, beliefs and ideas that are or become deeply held personal convictions for the members.
- Contain a more or less coherent set of narratives, anecdotes and stories that are circulated regularly inside the bubble. These stories all reinforce the core opinions in the bubble.
- Are kept alive by expelling anyone who questions of challenges the core opinions that define the bubble itself.
- Retain their rigidity because there is no possibility for the conflicted parties to understand the assumptions underlying the negative attributions they make about the opposing party.
- Are refreshed each time that a member has a negative experience of the opposing idea bubble that hence deepens his/her conviction of being 'right'. Each such experience creates a new story that is rapidly circulated amongst the members of the idea bubble, hence strengthening all members' conviction in their opinions.
- Are maintained by rejecting ideas from others outside the opinion bubble that challenge or contradict the core opinions inside the opinion bubble.
- Are maintained by ensuring that the network of relationships inside the opinion bubble do not include people who already question the core opinions in the bubble or who are likely to question them.

However, a caution…

- All human beings participate in opinion bubbles in their daily lives, though usually the intensity of the beliefs does not mobilize strong conflict with other opinion bubbles
- The formation of highly entrenched opinion bubbles involving destructive dynamics is a normal part of how human beings behave in collectives and does not necessarily signal the involvement of flawed people. Most opinion bubbles that are involved in high level conflict are in fact populated by 'normal' intelligent people.

The conditions under which opinion bubbles form

Entrenched opinion bubbles are more likely to form in some circumstances than in others. "Trigger" conditions appear to include when:

- Both parties believe that they are in a stronger position than the other to win the contest or battle that is involved
- Neither party can imagine the negative consequences of a prolonged battle and neither party allows themselves to imagine that a long battle is likely or even possible. This is linked with the overconfidence in having a 'win' (Johnson, 2004)
- One or more party believes that it is more important to proved themselves right than it is to act in ways that are likely to help the success of the collaborative project
- There are key figures in each party who advocate combative rather than conciliatory tactics
- In community conflict, there is a pre-existing issue that invokes a threat to the identity of a collective (Volkan, 2004).

Illustration

The theory behind opinion bubbles is complex and so for the sake of clarity a fictional illustration follows. The illustration faithfully follows the themes in real life situations encountered by the author in his role as consultant, but the facts have been changed to prevent recognition of the actual parties involved. In the example below we "hear" from two people; each of whom is entrenched inside an opinion bubble on opposing sides of the same conflict.

Josephine:

I'm Josephine, Director of A1 Recompense, a company that specializes in providing payroll and HR record keeping services for large companies. I'm sorry that I'm so dishevelled but I'm not sleeping well because of this conflict you just asked me to tell you about. The client is the local branch of Eco-Source which is an international company that provides engineering support to municipal and industrial water supply authorities globally. I've been dealing with their CFO whose name is Joseph. And you've no idea how much I want to erase that name from my memory!

The problem my team has is that for the last 6 months nearly everything we do is criticised by people in Joseph's team or Joseph himself. We're accused of being late with payments, making gross and excessive numbers of errors in salary and wage payments to Eco-Source personnel and of breaching our confidentiality agreement with

them. They also whinge endlessly about Bruce, who works with us and recently took over the job of being main client liaison with Eco-source.

The have caused nearly all the errors by providing us with faulty data and late data. "Rubbish in, rubbish out" explains it all. And as for the breach of confidentiality accusation, we know they've fabricated this as a reason to terminate their contract with us. They're going to get a nasty surprise if the take us to court. None of our other clients have had any complaints with us and some of them will act as witnesses for us if necessary.

Apart from correspondence about paying salaries and wages, the only communication we have with them now is between our company lawyer and theirs. They're threatening us with termination of contract on the grounds of our having breached key elements of the contract, and we're trying to prevent them from slandering us any more and throwing mud on our reputation with our existing and potential clientele around town. We know they want to get rid of us because they think they can save money by out-sourcing to the Philippines or China. Anyway, we're losing a lot of money on this and it can't go on. It could send our whole Australian Division broke if it's not fixed soon.

Joseph:

Hi I'm Joseph, CFO of Eco-Source. I guess you've heard of us. Then again if you've talked with anyone from A1 Recompense they will have already dumped all their venom about us onto you. Did you know we call them "A1 Theirdefence" because they're so prickly and defensive. Anyway, cutting through the crap, they're useless and their mistakes are destroying the morale in our business. We've got people about to lose their houses because A1 Theirdefence has under-paid them and in one case completely dropped them off the payroll for months! We're going to have to dump the bastards but they've got us tied up with a pretty draconian contract with nasty expensive escape clauses. We think we've got enough evidence now to nail them but my CEO is gutless and wants us to find a 'non-destructive solution'. He's dreaming! A1 Theirdefence is hurting a bit with the downturn in the economy and they need our business to survive. They'll never let go willingly.

Apart from the incessant series of errors that they have made since the beginning, and continue to make, their organization leaks like a sieve – in terms of confidentiality. We first found this out when we hired a graduate who had just completed her graduate studies placement with

> Theirdefence and she asked us if she could be transferred to Sydney when we had closed the contract for maintenance services with Sydney Water. She did not know that our negotiations with Sydney Water were confidential so she was naively happy to tell us where she got the information about our bid. And guess what – everything points towards our suspicion that it was from an employee of Theirdefence.
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> We've given up trying to talk sense with them. They just accuse us of all the faults in the world so we correspond through our lawyers now and we're building up our dossier for so we can serve notice on them in court. And this is confidential – right?

We can see the existence of entrenched opinion bubbles here because the two above stories focus on different elements of the same sequence of events but derive meaning in contradictory ways. That is from the same events, diverging chains of attribution of meaning occur in each opinion bubble. Nonetheless, each story is internally coherent. Neither contradicts itself and neither story includes in it any information that would support the other story. The primary task that has been lost in this conflict is for the two companies to collaborate so that A1 Recompense is able to provide efficient and effective administrative services to employees of Eco-Source. Without regular exchange of information and feedback the task breaks down and the breakdown feeds the conflict – as is illustrated in the stories above.

As a pre-view to a method of working as a consultant with this system, you, the reader could draw two circles on a piece of paper. One circle would represent the pejorative views that A1 Recompense holds about Eco-Source and the other would represent the pejorative views that Eco-Source holds about A1 Recompense. Read through Josephine's story to find material to fill in the first circle and read through Joseph's story to populate the second circle.

The clash of reality between these two bubbles is so extreme that one wonders how two groups of intelligent people, ostensibly with access to the same information, could become so completely convinced of such contradictory 'truths' (Wilson, 2004). And as most readers will be aware, this same pattern is replicated time and time again all around the world, resulting in a great deal grief, pain and loss of hope. What then, creates such destructive patterns of meaning making?

The genesis and maintenance of Opinion Bubbles

Now, in breach of good academic practice where the illusion of objectivity is paramount, I'd like to co-create with you're an imaginary scene that brings you, the reader, into conflict with me, the author.

Let's imagine that I disagree with you over something that we're both involved in. We try to talk through our difference of opinion, but I don't agree with your reasoning and you don't agree with mine. I get a bit anxious because it's uncomfortable to be with you in the face of your certainty that you're right and that I'm wrong. I don't believe I'm wrong but I'm human and so you cast a bit of doubt in my mind. And anyway, this is an issue that's very important to me so I can't really afford to let you convince me that you're right. So I do three things. (1) I search carefully through all my memories for information and episodes that confirm my point of view. (2) I take your arguments one by one and find evidence to systematically discount each of them or to show that they're not of great significance to the issue at stake. (You and I might focus on the same situations and events but each of us creates different attributions and hence meaning to these events.) I'm breathing a bit more freely now, but I still need the social validation of my point of view so (3) I seek out people who are already of my conviction or I sit with those whom I think will be sympathetic to me and I explain why they should believe that I'm right, why they should conduct active combat against you to support my point of view. But this coalition-building activity is not as simple as it might appear. I have to approach people who have some reason to support me. There must be some pay-off for them, such as:-

- *I have some influence over their well-being such as financial, social or reputational*
- *My cause offers them a clear role that enables them to excel at something*
- *Joining the cause gives them an identity – being a part of something important and meaningful*
- *My cause captures some issue that's important to them personally such as fighting injustice, supporting the persecuted, or battling mindless bureaucracy*
- *I'm in an important social group for the other person and supporting my cause helps consolidate them into my 'in group'…and so on.*

After some time has passed the members of my opinion bubble have learned not to question the truth of the opinions that are inside our bubble and they've become adept at discounting the opinions in your opinion bubble. Now it's not just 'my' opinion bubble It's populated by a whole lot of people.

And of course at the same time as I've been building and reinforcing my opinion bubble, so have you. You've got your coalition and I've got mine. (I might even call mine the "coalition of the willing"!)

So we're both now well equipped to completely avoid any meaningful dialogue with each other and we've built up robust reasons as to why dialogue with each other's coalition is futile.

If we were both to stand back at this point with a genuine interest in avoiding a protracted and destructive battle, we'd understand that the very thing that makes each of us feel good is the root cause of the problem between us. That is, whilst our opinion bubbles provide a great emotional and psychological security and they protect us both from doubt, anxiety and uncertainty about our point of view, they also create an impermeable barrier to resolution of the differences between us.

Now we are both faced with the stark choice of relinquishing the certainty that we have spent so much energy building, or entering into a terrible spiral of escalating conflict, stress and waste of resources of all kinds. But now even if you and I did move to a point of being willing to re-start an attempt to understand each other, this would be strongly resisted by other members of our coalitions. There would be a risk that even if you and I resolved our differences, the opinion bubbles that we'd created would remain in force and undo our efforts.

Anyway, a generic history of conflict in human systems shows that we are most likely to continue to maintain and mobilize our opinion bubbles. The emotional and psychological hard work of really engaging with our doubt looms as a horrible spectre and so we avoid it. That is, we will knowingly continue on a path that is will create destruction for both of us. Now let's end the conflict between you and I and we'll move on to other material in the paper…

In brief, once inside an opinion bubble, from the point of view of the participants, there is no reason for changing their views or seeking reconciliation with the other side. However, from an external point of view it is clear that opening up the situation for dialogue and hence for resolution depends on breaking the illusion of both parties that their opinion bubble contains the only form or truth. As a direct result of the subjective experience of the phenomenon, once the opinion bubbles are firmly in place it is almost impossible for anyone who is inside the system to entertain enough doubt to be open to dialogue.

Often both parties will call in lawyer and when the lawyers involved take a litigative approach, the opinion bubbles will be locked into place and the drama will play out in the form of a protracted, expensive and stressful legal

battle[4]. This is because a 'successful' result of litigation is that one party proves in a court of law that it is 'right'. The process of gathering evidence then is one of discounting disconfirming evidence and emphasising confirming evidence. This is exactly the same process as was involved in setting up the original opinion bubbles. So, with some occasional exceptions, taking a litigative approach will strengthen opinion bubbles and amplify the painful and destructive elements of the conflict. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the involved parties will be able to continue their working relationship once one party has been declared by a court to be in the right[5] and the other to be wrong.

In my experience as a consultant, the initial approach to work with catastrophic breakdown resulting from sever conflict usually comes from someone who is outside the opinion bubbles and hence can see the levels of destructiveness that are invoked by both parties but denied by both. Usually it is obvious to an outsider that escalation and legal action is likely to be expensive and destructive. The involvement of a neutral, independent facilitative third party such as a mediator of facilitator can enable the scenario to unfold in a much more productive fashion[6].

The pragmatics of intervening

The fundamental principle underpinning intervention in systems where catastrophic breakdown has occurred is to give each party access to the attributions and meaning that they have placed on the same events. This starts to re-build shared understanding and reduce the levels of splitting and projection that occur.

Practical steps in this complex facilitative process include:

- Identifying the 'client' and developing clarity on the 'primary task' of the consultancy/facilitation
- Establishing a "without prejudice" zone to create a thinking space
- The facilitator building alliances with both/all 'camps' whilst maintaining a sense of neutrality

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[4] Whilst standard legal processes in Australia include steps designed to resolve issues without their reaching full court hearings, the visible Engagement of lawyers by either party is likely to trigger defensive attitudes and behaviours in the whole system.

[5] I use the term "right" in a colloquial sense and not a legal sense. In fact courts base their decisions on "the balance of probabilities". (Personal conversation SJP)

[6] This is an over-simplification because with prudent use of 'without prejudice' conversations between parties the security of having court action as a last resort can be retained but a space cleared for more productive conversations.

- The facilitator developing a rich picture of both the contents and the sociometry involved in the 'opinion bubbles' of each camp. This includes tracking the most powerful of the negative attributions that each party has placed on the key evocative events
- Introducing the conflicted parties to the notion of opinion bubbles and illustrating with real material from the conflict
- Working with small groups initially to break down the opinion bubbles and then expanding the size of the groups until all major players are included.

At this point the conflicted parties regain their ability to work on the original primary task. Further work is desirable to heal the trauma that has been experienced as a result of the conflict. This includes the following:-

- Ensuring that each organization works to change its narratives throughout the affected parts
- Re-building confidence in participants when the inevitable breaches of agreements occur
- Re-introducing into the client system the capacity to provide its own on-going facilitation across what was previously a significant divide.

More details on this process for working with catastrophic breakdown

Each of the seven elements in the list above are dealt with in more detail below. In the following descriptions I revert to a largely informal and first person writing style to illustrate the complex emotional and psychological gymnastics involved in conducting such interventions.

1 Identify "the client" and the purpose or goal of the consultancy/facilitation project

There's a significant challenge to identifying 'the client' when consulting to a conflicted system because the actual 'client' is the relationship between the two parties. But the relationship itself is not an entity that is capable of interacting, so there is a need for the full endorsement and engagement of both parties. Usually one party will have recommend me because they've had contact with me previously and so it's then necessary to engage with the other party so that they develop enough confidence to agree to my conducting the work. In fact, a pre-existing relationship with on part of the client system inevitably results in a rich set of mental representations about that client and his/her system and so I can not commence a consulting assignment of this nature with a subjective sense of neutrality. This can in part be compensated for with rigorous self-examination and high quality supervision.

A consultant derives his/her authority to conduct the work with clients by having a clear primary task to conduct. The stated primary task is not often what the client actually wishes for and in the case of catastrophic breakdown in relationships this is particularly true. Both parties will usually tell me that they are engaging me to find an amicable solution to the conflict so that the two parties can continue to work together. Usually both parties actually want me to help them prove that the other party is wrong and bad. The latter primary task is hidden deeply in the subtext of their conversations with me rather than being overt. In the early phases of the intervention it is not wise to directly address this contradiction, but later on with the use of the opinion bubbles framework it becomes necessary and useful to do so.

2 Creating a litigation-free 'thinking space'

The legal term "without prejudice" means that what occurs in such settings cannot later be used in court by either party. Hence it is necessary for the facilitator, before beginning any substantial work, to get written agreement from the entire client system that all interactions, emails, conversation, phone calls etc. that are conducted as a part of the consultant facilitator's work are without prejudice. This includes interactions between parties when the facilitator is not directly involved. To achieve agreement to conduct without prejudice conversations and meetings usually requires the approval of the lawyers who have been involved to date. My experience is that the lawyers sometimes feel displaced by my involvement and so require careful 'relationship management'. It is important to keep them informed and in some cases involved in no prejudice conversations but to ensure that they do not re-introduce patterns of behavior that shut down the embryonic thinking space.

3 Building alliances whilst maintaining neutrality

By their nature, opinion bubbles are highly defended against intervention from outside and so any consultant who engages with such a system will be seen as a potential danger to the security of the opinion bubble. The first thing I do to when called in is to interview all of the key players that I can reasonably reach in both opinion bubbles. This is the first test of how my neutrality as 'outsider' can be established and maintained. As stated earlier, I will have been initially contacted by someone associated with one side of the conflict and so will be treated with suspicion by the other side. Usually the most effective way to deal with this suspicion is to name it and assure people from the 'suspicious' side that I understand their need to test my neutrality. Early in the interview process I will often ask people at the end of an interview if any of my behaviors has reduced their confidence in my neutrality.

The lived experience during the interviews is that I need to demonstrate the capacity to listen fully to each of the parties' stories and treat them as credible

otherwise I will quickly be seen as a threat to the dearly held dominant story-lines in the opinion bubble. A danger in this process is that in being fully heard, participants may start to believe that I am supporting their point of view against the other points of view. A second danger is that inevitably as I listen to one strong emotionally laden story, my subjective in-the-moment belief of the truth-lines moves towards the person who is talking at the time. So during one hour I am fully with someone telling one side of the story and then in the next hour I may be fully with someone telling the opposing story. The tough reality of maintaining neutrality is that after an hour of being immersed in the passionate beliefs of one party, it's essential to be able to sit with the passionate beliefs of the other party without discounting that new story because of just having heard the opposite. This means maintaining close 'watch' on my own process and catching myself swinging from favoring one party to favoring the other, and back again.

There is an interior element of neutrality and an exterior element. The interior is the subjective sense of the consultant over time being able to hold in mind in equal strength the truth of two or more opposing realities. The exterior element is the way in which the population of each idea bubble constructs stories about nature of the consultant's neutrality.

If any one of the disputing parties does not want the dispute to be resolved the simplest way to halt progress on resolution is to describe the consultant as being biased towards the other party. This narrative of the 'biased consultant' then justifies the complainant's party in disengaging from the consultant and asking for a 'better' one. As a consequence of this dynamic, the very survival of the consulting and facilitation process depends on the actions of the consultant resulting in the story-lines being created by both of the parties that the consultant is adequately neutral.

In practice this means being vigilant with every detail of the interaction. For example:

- I rotate the order of names on emails so no one party's name appears first more than any other.
- When I talk with one party about an important issue I tell the other party that I have had a conversation – whilst not disclosing the content.
- When leaving meetings where both parties are present I never leave the room with one party alone and in meetings if one party leaves the room I leave the room and go to a different place until both parties are back in the room.

The rationale for these behaviors is that in such low trust environments, all participants also project their lack of trust onto me as facilitator and so my

behavior needs to minimize the 'triggers' that might set of negative imaginings about my being partisan.

4 Building a rich picture of the contents of the 'opinion bubbles' held by each camp

It is important to ensure from the beginning that the consultant is authorized equally by very senior people in both opinion bubbles and it is often best to both obtain a brief from each leader, and at the same time gather information from the leaders about how they see the conflict. Each leader will provide a view as to who are the key people involved in the conflict and hence whom should be interviewed. However, in the process of conducting interviews I usually hear the names of other people who have a major participation in the key opinion bubbles. One useful question is to ask "Whose views and behaviours do you think are making it so difficult to resolve this situation." The response will usually include the names of the most vociferous members of the opposing opinion bubble. At the same time the leaders' responses will also provide insights into the mental representations (attitudes, beliefs, etc.) that they have of the other system.

It is these mental representations that will later provide the key to resolution of the problematic difference in opinions between the parties. That is, the difference in the opinions themselves is problematic but not fatal. The real problem lies in the pattern that prevents the diverse opinions from being reconciled, and this pattern is that each disputing party has a mental representation of the other party as bad, hostile, incompetent or other negative. More about that later.

The purpose of the interviews is as follows:

- Identify the core story-lines and the repetitive behaviours that define each opinion bubble. (Right from the start of an intervention I start to draw up my own understanding of the contents of each opinion bubble.)
- Identify the key players or gatekeepers of each opinion bubble
- Determine the degree to which the content opinion bubbles are incompatible and if there are any overlaps
- Determine how hard the 'shells' are around the opinion bubbles and to what extent they may be permeable
- Determine the depth of negative feeling that each opinion bubble has about the other
- Identify where there is major divergence of attribution by opposing parties about key evocative events. This provides material to open up future conversations between opposing parties

- Listen for cues to resolution. These usually come in the form of "If they had only…"

5 Introducing the parties to the idea of opinion bubbles

From experience I've realized that skirting around the edges of the differences of opinion in such situations usually wastes time and effort. My usual preference now is that once I am confident that I have a basic grasp of the situation to sit down one-to-one with key players and put diagrams of the two opinion bubbles in front of them and ask for comment. Usually they laugh (and/or cringe) and say "Yes, exactly!" In all such cases the participants have offered refinements to the contents of the opinion bubbles and have started to muse about the obvious contradictions and paradoxes in the situation.

If the ensuing conversation is successful they will understand that it is the very existence of the self-referring, self-reinforcing opinion bubbles that is the 'root cause' of problem and that it is necessary find a way to reduce the intensity of the difference between the opinion bubbles in order to find a way forward. One could say that the 'identified problem' has moved from the direct conflict to the existence of opinion bubbles. However, it is almost inevitable that as these people talk about the situation, they will have embedded in their language some of the narratives that are in the core of their own opinion bubble. That is, intellectually they will understand the concept of the need to bring together the opinion bubbles but emotionally and psychologically they will still be firmly embedded in their own.

The process of working one-to-one with participants starts to create some curiosity and hence permeability of the boundaries of their own opinion bubbles. It is necessary to do this before getting people from opposing opinion bubbles into the same room. The necessary insight is for some or all of the 'gatekeepers' of both opinion bubbles to be able to deeply understand that there is an exact equivalence about the two (or more) opinion bubbles. That is, the occupants of each bubble are fully committed to their view and fully committed against the views of the other opinion bubble. Once this is established, the consultant needs to declare that from his point of view both opinion bubbles have roughly equal merit and his experience of being 'inside' each opinion bubble is the same. An important dialogue follows. Whilst the following dialogue is fabricated, it could easily be a transcription of an actual dialogue.

Consultant: "So when I'm with people in the Eco-Source opinion bubble they say that all of what you say is wrong. Then when I'm with you who is in the AI Recompense opinion bubble you say that they're wrong. Given that you're probably all intelligent capable people, how can that be?"

A1 Recompense participant "They're not quite as smart as you might think. They've messed up and they need to pull the wool over your eyes. You don't know enough about the whole situation to know when they're lying."

Consultant: "How could you be sure that they don't say or think the same about you? And you seem to think it's possible that they're all dumb, incompetent and misguided whilst everyone from A1 Recompense is all intelligent, competent and on the right track. I don't. I've met them and their team seems remarkably similar in intelligence and competence to yours"

A1 Recompense participant: "I'm sure they're not all stupid, but enough of them are belligerent to scare the others into following".

Consultant: "I'm here because I can be neutral. If I believed only you, I'd be very biased against Eco-Source and so my neutrality and hence usefulness as consultant would be ruined. On the other hand if I believed only them I'd be very biased against you, so I'd also be useless as a neutral consultant. So the only choice I have is to take you seriously and to take them seriously at the same time. In my view that's difficult but possible. Are you willing to work with me to find out how I reach that conclusion?"

A1 Recompense participant: "I guess I don't have a lot of other options. My boss has said I have to work with you so I will".

Early in the intervention the conversation needs also to start to explore the notion of 'not so extreme' because this starts to open up cracks in the defensive systems of each opinion bubble.

6 Working on the opinion bubbles in small groups initially and expanding to larger groups

Whilst I so far I have described opinion bubbles as monolithic, that is far from true. Within each opinion bubble there is a huge amount of variation of opinion and a wide range of topics upon which those opinions are held. One of the keys to breaking down the rigid barriers between the opposing opinion bubbles lies in exploring the diversity of opinion within each opposing party and finding people who are most ready to engage with 'the enemy'. The first engagement where parties from opposing opinion bubbles can productively meet needs to be chosen with care. The topic needs to be one that is vital to the success of their collective venture but not so charged with meaning and emotion that it will evoke small scale warfare in the meeting room.

Early meetings need to be very well contained and structured with safety valves like 'time out' and with full authority given to the facilitator to pause,

stop, coach and intervene. This is in itself the topic of a full paper but some general principles on containment can be found in Ringer (2002).

My preference is to open the meeting with a statement of the purpose. This is usually something like "We're meeting today to find ways of continuing to work together so as to complete the collaborative venture that you are both involved in". I do not frame the meeting as having the purpose to build relationships because the relationships are in fact in the service of getting the job done. I describe relationships as being necessary to create a "thinking space" that enables opposing parties to think together constructively.

The second major component of these early meetings is to establish that existence and the key contents of the opinion bubbles. The consultant's version may need to be refined with the input from the meeting participants.

The third key element is for the consultant to say that he must remain neutral in the conversation and his role is to create a "thinking space" for participants to explore if there is any way in which there evolved such a fundamental difference between the two parties.

Depending on how mature and psychologically sophisticated are the participants, it can be sufficient for the facilitator to simply suggest that the two parties attempt a conversation to help each other understand what lead them to hold the views that are outlined in each of the opinion bubbles – usually displayed on a screen or chart for them both to view.

Again, the details of facilitating this kind of conversation would be the topic of a separate paper but the key issue is to keep coaching participants to ensure that the quality of the thinking space remains adequate and that differences are not turned into attacks – which kill the thinking space.

It is likely that two or three meetings will need to be held with different small groups of participants. This builds a tenuous set of relationships between the opinion bubbles and hence creates some permeability in each. If the choice of participants of the first two or three meetings has been good, and the meetings themselves have started to build a shared understanding of the genesis of the opinion bubbles, then it will be possible to have larger meetings or workshops. It can be useful to create an expectation that these workshops will lead to agreed actions to progress the collaborative venture between the parties.

At this point in the intervention it becomes possible for the two parties to start to re-engage with the original primary task and hence to recommence some productive work. In my experience this creates a great sense of relief and satisfaction along with a rejuvenation of hope for successful collaboration.

From here on the involvement of the consultant can sometimes diminish significantly. This transition needs to be very carefully framed so that participants do not have the experience of being abandoned by their key provider of a safety net. On the other hand, over involvement of the consultant provides a signal to the participants that they still don't have the capability to work together without help and this can trigger regression to unhelpful behaviours.

My experience is that it is helpful to be very clear about stepping back but to offer to be involved in extra tricky meetings or conversations from time to time. It is also useful to set up a time in the future when participants will come back together in a workshop with the facilitator for a review of progress and a 'lessons learned' session. One participant reflected back to me about this tactic by saying "You know because I knew we'd all get back together in a month's time to talk about our progress I sometimes behaved better because when I was tempted to revert to the old battle I imagined the workshop coming up and having to tell you about my bad behaviour!"

The following stages relate to the consulting to a system after the catastrophic breakdown has been dealt with and the parties are re-engaging with each other to carry out the original primary task.

7 Working to ensure that each organization changes its narratives

This is more likely to remain a dream than a reality! Consultants are rarely called in to situations that can be resolved easily, so it is likely that the negative and pejorative narratives in one organization about the other have circulated much more widely than the group of people that the consultant can work with. In one case I worked with a serious dispute in a small team in one country set up pervasive combative narratives between the corporate finance departments of two global companies. Changing this could take ten or more years. Hence, no matter how effective the work of the consultant and the participants she/he directly involves, the 'noise' in the wider organizations will remain largely untouched. Even when some excellent remedial work on the destructive narratives has been done with the core group, re-contamination will almost certainly occur over time. In another case where the conflict between parties was of interest to the wider community and the business community, the press kept reporting stories of conflict one year after the key players had reached a genuine accord.

Changing organizational narratives requires input from people who are at least two levels above the original conflict and these people are seldom motivated to make a concerted effort to intervene once the substantive problem appears to be solved. Leaders and executives usually ask "Is it fixed

yet" and when the answer is "Yes", they go on to the next matter that demands their time.

A second impediment is that few leaders in organizations deeply comprehend that a significant part of their job is to help to shape constructive organizational narratives. In brief, an organization 'talks' its culture in streams of narratives that serve as the invisible bloodstream of the enterprise. Many leaders don't know that this essential circulatory system even exists, let alone knowing how to intervene in it.

Thirdly, entrenched conflicts often arise through one or more sub-groups having a vested interest in a particular course of action that secures their jobs, identity, networks, income, recognition, power or resources. These can be very difficult indeed to 'smoke out' because if they are identified they can be dismantled so concealment is survival. In some cases the sub-group with the vested interests may not be visibly involved in the conflict and so will continue to operate even when there is an apparent resolution between the conflicted parties. Hence, the conflict can re-heat a soon as the direct intervention stops and sometimes apparent agreements that are made as a part of the direct interventions of the consulting process can come undone for no apparent reason.

8 Re-building confidence when apparent breaches of the agreement occur

"I told you so!" is the common refrain soon after the first major engagement occurs between the populations of the opinion bubbles and after the first agreements for re-conciliation are made. "I told you we could not trust them. Look what they've done to us. It would have been better if we'd just kept on fighting. This is worse because we got our expectations up and now they've been dashed."

I can have trouble managing my own response to this. I want to say "You've made massive progress, the collaborative venture was a complete mess and now you've got some hope of progress, and you're whinging about one part of the recent agreement not being honoured." But if I say that I've missed the point. The point being that the meaning of small events is huge when trust is low. It's the symbolism not the raw data that matter. It's the meaning not the facts.

After a period where each party has experienced the other as being hostile and destructive towards the other, it involves an emotional risk to allow oneself to start to hope and trust again. It feels raw and dangerous to do so. As a consequence, **any** subsequent behaviour on the part of one party that appears to the other party as a breach of agreement has a powerful negative and painful effect. And whilst one can set up preventative measures in

advance, such as insisting on clear documentation of agreements, it is impossible to protect against some painful regression to the 'old ways'. The best protection is to warn parties in advance that given the nature of human behaviour, it is not unusual for some breaches of trust to occur and that the challenge is to build resilience rather than flip immediately into despair and to re-engage in open warfare. After all, 'new' context in which a breach of trust occurs is one where the facilitative consultant can quickly intervene and to help the parties repair the new damage that has just occurred. The old context of breaches of trust was that every breach led further down a spiral of hostility and hopelessness.

In summary, I encourage participants to use the recovery from breaches of agreements as a way of building resilience.

9 Re-introducing into the client system the ability to facilitate its own maintenance

Once the client system has recovered adequate resilience and presumably sorted out the major issues that were at the origin of their problematic differences it is important to overtly phase out the consultant so that the system becomes self-maintaining once again. This process is actually seeded from the very start of the consultant's involvement because one of the 'truths' that is introduced from the start is that the system needs to build high quality 'thinking spaces' and one element of these thinking spaces is that there is a shared facilitation by all participants rather than reliance on a formal leader or facilitator. So throughout the consultant facilitator's involvement, he or she needs to identify times when a group is successful at contributing to their own facilitation.

Some people have developed their leadership style to be combative and so it is also important from early on for the consultant facilitator to identify these people, reinforce their facilitative behaviour and counsel them against inflammatory behaviours. And for long-term change to occur in a system it will be necessary to have at least one opinion leader from each opinion bubble to have developed a strong and sustainable facilitative style to deal with each (inevitable) new crisis that occurs after the consultant facilitator is phased out. The unfortunate truth of most situations though, is that during the worst of the battle between the opinion bubbles, the people who lead the combat will be the least reflective, the most dogmatic and the most black-and-white thinkers – whether they be formal or informal leaders. So moving from the time when the opinion bubbles were dominant to the time when they have been dissolved sometimes means a changing the effective leadership of the effort in both parties. The generals who used to rally the troops to battle need to be relegated to less powerful positions and the facilitative leaders need to be elevated. And none of this is likely to occur though changes in the formal

hierarchy of either organization. It needs to be achieved largely through what participants across the board value in term of leadership. Hence, the long-term resolution of organizational problems that manifest themselves as opinion bubbles demands a change of organizational culture in the affected parts of both organizations. Needless to say, this usually remains a goal rather than a reality.

The major challenge facing the consultant facilitator is hence to work at a level that enables the organizations involved to elevate their collaborative and reflective members to formal or informal leadership positions and ensure that the dogmatic black-and-white thinkers are taken less seriously. If there was a sure-fired method for doing that the inventor of that process would now be rich and famous. Rather, the combined authenticity, persistence, energy, commitment and resilience of the consultant facilitator provides the means of seeding this major change.

Conclusion

When groups or teams that are initially collaborating on the same primary task fall out and the conflict between reaches a certain point, they divert their energy from doing the collaborative work to the conflict itself. Impenetrable boundaries form around each party and real communication between them ceases. Levels of projection and paranoia rise and no person who is directly involved is able to usefully intervene. The introduction of an external neutral consultant provides one possibility for breaking the deadlock. However the consultant him/herself is at great risk of being seen to be biased or partisan and hence losing effectiveness. This paper suggests a number of principles and processes that can help consultants in this situation navigate through the minefield.

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