

OD Network Conference, November 1985: Some Notes on Process

I did not take extensive notes, nor did I set up my role within the conference as a complete consultancy-research model, so my impressions are at a much lower level than they would have been if such an exercise had been taken on more professionally. I went as a member, and I went to learn, and to rest, and to contribute as a member.

Certain signals were given at the boundary by members of the planning group, the first of which was that we were met with a camera flash and very strong directions as to how to join the conference by putting a photograph of ourselves on a piece of paper and sticking it on the wall with comments about ourselves. This meant that learning to meet people was suddenly separated from the personal relationship and meant that people went around the room looking at the walls in order to learn about people who were there, rather than meeting the people concerned, who were actually going round the walls looking at the pieces of paper, in order to meet the people who were there. It seemed a good idea at the time, but I experience it in retrospect as a dissociative, or schizoid, defence, which gave an underlying tone of inauthenticity to the relationship structure. Personae existed on paper on the walls rather than in interpersonal bonding within membership. One result of this was that the paper personae remained forever as icons on the wall of the plenary room while their shadows fled consistently out of plenary structure into smaller sub-groups in other rooms.

Apart from the in-house details of the conference, the planning group gave several further initiatives. One was to introduce a set of helpful norms, derived they said from the experiences of other conferences. Now my understanding is that the norms of a group emerge and are part of that group's behaviour and that the norm that was emerging was that we delegated certain structures of authority and defence to a planning group, in order to manage the anxiety about discovering the norms of the group in the here and now. I think this issue of imposed/exposed norm structures is very important in the facilitating of a healthy conference. One norm that appeared to be signalled was that conflict was unhealthy and could not be tolerated by the core of the planning group, a norm which had been reinforced by the history of the planning group and its inability to deal with negative feedback or differences creatively, a history which was apparently fairly widely known. These norms appeared towards the end of the conference as planning group members initiated a sing-song about plenary process, which was a clear reification of wishful thinking, trying to assert that feedback was easy and process was smooth and people were lovely, rather than enabling us to look at the blockages which made the absolute opposite the experience of the conference.

Another initiative taken by the planning group was the provision of a space and time framework within which creative content could be generated by the conference membership. There was a brief negotiation of commitment to this skeleton time-table with particular stress on the importance of retaining the plenary times during the weekend. Commitment was given to this and then almost immediately abrogated, renegotiated and broken, particularly by

one or two of the more dominant members of the planning group itself. Sub-group formation was intensive, in full flight pattern, generating very tight boundaries, intense cohesion and polarisation between inside and outside. Plenary sessions were bad. small groups were good. In-group members were good. out-group members were bad. Or as groups split into two or three sectors, idealisation and polarisation were spread between the sectors. Within each sector itself, polarisation and scapegoating of individuals, or figures, indicated the primitive nature of the anxiety defences in operation. The impression given was that the total membership of the conference was in some kind of compulsive, regressive flight from an intense anxiety-generating environment, presumably the transference being picked up and resonated unconsciously within the client settings. People commented, "you know it is cold out there, I want to get in somewhere warm". There were complaints about the central heating being inadequate and I had the sense of a corporate form of idealised intruterine regression.

Even within this regression, there was polarisation into good womb and bad womb figures, with intense anxiety generated by anyone who opened the boundary. Ambivalence about boundary transactions was intense, with groups saying quite firmly that they wished to have their boundaries both open and closed. I noted patterns of intense polarisation and ambivalence in many dimensions within the behaviour patterns of the conference. The search for sacrificial scapegoat was also a common theme of the unconscious, or semi-conscious, dynamics in play, both within sectors and between sectors and within the conference membership as a whole. Leadership bids tended to be generated from the most anxious persons present, offering themselves as some kind of sacrificial carriers for the negative emotions and anxieties generated.

I had the impression that although most consultants here would have worked with the concept of an open systems approach to organisation development, the management of the conference as an institution was treated as a closed system, largely because boundaries were vested with paranoid fantasy. So the membership of the conference was in flight from its environment. Each sub-group was in flight from the rest of the conference. Each person within each sub-group was in flight from the rest of the sector. The task was to burrow as deeply back away from this nasty threatening world as we could possibly get. I wonder therefore what that is saying about the competence of organisation development consultants in the present climate to overcome and work through their own primitive paranoid schizoid defensive material and enable its resolution in their client systems. I sense it would be an important step forward to become aware of both inside and outside and transactions between insides and outsides of sub-groupings and of the conference as a whole. Such a breakthrough would also have implications for the flow of feedback, allowing unfiltered feedback through boundaries and in particular through the boundary of the planning group. This appeared to be filtering out all negative information through norms of fear of destroying dependence leadership. As so often happens in a free association organisation in which strong personalities emerge as dependence leaders, it is the intrapersonal defences of the key dependence leadership which is projected into, and mirrored by, the organisation itself. Therefore any systemic analysis of the organisation structure was perceived as a direct threat, or attack upon, the dependence leadership within the planning group. Patterns of defence, loyalties and interpretation of learning as personal criticism, destroyed much of the potential for using the total systemic behaviour of the conference as a learning context.

At another level we have to deal with the time-line, not only the here and now series of shells and levels of conference membership. Any examination of history was also taboo. It seems to me to be quite vital to allow the dimension of time into any understanding of group dynamics, as in the study of fluid dynamics. The fact that this was the first meeting of the conference membership after the formal closure of the organisational development network last year meant that it was somewhat in the sense of a wake, a rump, struggling with the problems of loss and bereavement, while perpetuating patterns from the past in an attempt to deny the loss of the known world and avoid pressing forward into the opening creativity of the new. There was a sort of phoenix myth about the whole event, which was quite unexaminable and yet utterly archetypal of this kind of history within a free association voluntary membership institution.

Another common pattern of defence was the splitting off of psyche from soma and the refusal to allow integration between the two with denial of one or the other. Similarly there was a splitting between right brain and left brain activities, stylised in the male/female split. The resulting defensive structures were used collusionally to block some of the most significant learning and development which were available to members within the conference event.

Social Context and Future Agenda

Finally I want to look at the context of organisation development consultancy within the country as a whole. I take it that each consultant within their client context is picking up transference from their client-base and that the corporate behaviour of the OD network reflects therefore the unresolved transference held, collusionally, within the consultant matrix. I think it is not surprising that the OD network went through a paroxysm of anxiety and conflict and has regressed to a much more primitive defence structure over the last 4 years. I would suggest that this probably reflects cultural changes within the client base as the limits to growth have been encountered and the levels of polarisation, scapegoating, conflict, paranoia, resource struggle, denial of innovation, conservative backlash and so forth have characterised the culture of the country, within its global matrix. My sense here is that the organisation development consultants are facing a level of defensive behaviour which has not yet been worked through within OD training or mutual consultancy and which now provides us with the growing point, or leading edge, of the agenda for the development of consultancy in tomorrow's world. In particular we would need to look at the origin of the anxieties against which these primitive defences are in place, their function and the kind of defence structures used to contain them, together with modes of intervention and modification as well as structures of supportive, non-collusional, interaction between consultants in order to break through in this field. I think there was sufficient evidence within the dynamics, symbolisation and the wording of contributions within the conference to conclude that the primal agenda is now the crucial focus of both learning and flight within the dynamics of the world of organisation development consultancy.

David Wasdell

4th November 1985

Meridian Programme, Meridian House, 115 Poplar High Street, London E14 0AE

Hosted by: Unit for Research into Changing Institutions (URCHIN)

(Charity Registration No: 284542)

Web-site: www.meridian.org.uk