Seeing Human Interaction in the System

Seeing the System

A Familiar Story of Tops, Middles, Bottoms and Customers

Open mind; new thinking and shared thinking

Open heart; deep genuine empathy for the whole system

Open will; practical application supported by individuals synd teams

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Introduction

In his book Seeing Systems, Barry Oshry talks about Tops, Middles, Bottoms and Customers. On first reading I wondered if this was just too simple in terms of helping to understand the tangle, the drama and the chaos that can be organisational life. However whilst to get the full impact of the learning, reading the complete book is recommended, there are a number of headlines that can really support a different way of seeing things and understanding and developing empathy for others.

The central tenet of the book is that in certain interactions we are either Tops, Middles, Bottoms or Customers. Tops have overall responsibility for some piece of the action; Bottoms are on the receiving end of initiatives over which we have no control and Middles are caught between conflicting demands and priorities. And in still other interactions, we are Customers, looking to some other person or group for a product or service we need. So, even in the most complex, multi-level, multifunctional organisations, we are all constantly moving in and out of Top/Middle/Bottom/Customer conditions and contexts.

Fundamental Principles

- Systems are made up of people and processes
- People think differently about the same thing – it's messy – there are often unintended consequences and dramas
- As leaders and change makers we hold assumptions about what people think – that's messy
- Listening and Inquiry support us in understanding the system
- Empathic listening delivers greater engagement and connectedness
- And we still need to deal with Tops, Middles and Bottoms and our response to being a Top, Middle or Bottom

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What is life like as a Top?

When interacting with Tops, we are not just dealing person to person: we are dealing with people living – sometimes struggling to survive – in a world of complexity and accountability – lots of issues to deal with, difficult issues, unpredictable issues, issues they thought were taken care of that keep coming back, as well as issues regarding the direction, culture, growth and structure of the system.
And Tops are accountable for the successes and failures of the system.

How can we have greater empathy for Tops?

If we are able to see into Top's world, we may have a better sense of what happened to our memo to the top executive suggesting improvements in the operation. Why did we get no response? It may be that Top experienced our well-intentioned suggestion as just one more complication in an already overcomplicated life. It's also possible that Top, feeling responsible for the overall operation, experienced our cavalierly offered suggestion as a criticism. It may also be that if we see Top's world more clearly, we can come up with smarter strategies for getting our proposals heard.

Challenge

Can we come across in a way that is seen as reducing the complexity of Top's world rather than increasing it?
Can we come across in a way that communicates that we share responsibility for the system?
There is a pattern that develops with great regularity in the widest variety of organisations and institutions.

The pattern goes something like this:

Tops are burdened by what feels like unmanageable complexity
Top "teams" are caught up in destructive turf warfare
Tops are fighting fires when they should be shaping the system's future

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What is life like as a Bottom?

When interacting with Bottoms, we are not just dealing with people living, sometimes struggling to survive in a world of invisibility and vulnerability.

Bottoms are often not seen by Tops, Tops can influence their lives in major and minor ways:

- They change terms and conditions
- They reorganise
- They shut down parts of the organisation
- They come up with new initiatives
- They acquire new entities
- They divest themselves of others
- All of this happens to Bottoms

How can we have greater empathy for Bottoms?

If we are able to see into Bottom's world, we may have a better idea of why frontline staff greeted our initiative with a wall of resistance. Given that Tops are always doing things to them, it's easy to see how our initiative was experienced as just another case of "Them doing it to us again." And if we see into Bottom's world more clearly, it may be that we can come up with better strategies for gaining interest, ideas and engagement.

Challenge

How can we acknowledge their experience of vulnerability? And how can we position our initiative such that it reduces rather than increases that vulnerability?

Bottoms are oppressed by what they see as distant and uncaring Tops

Bottom group members are trapped in stifling pressures to conform

Bottoms' negative feelings towards Tops and Middles distracts them from putting their creative energies into the delivery of products and services

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What is life like as a Middle?

When interacting with Middles, we are not just dealing person to person; we are dealing with someone living in, sometimes struggling to survive in a world of conflicting demands, being pushed and pulled.

They are pushed and pulled between Tops and Bottoms.

What Tops want from them, they don't have; they often need Bottoms to get.

And what Bottoms want from them, they often need to get from Tops.

They experience "simple" requests as complex, conflicting demands; being pushed and pulled between Tops and Bottoms.

Middles are torn and confused between the conflicting demands and priorities coming at them from Tops and Bottoms. Middle peers are often alienated from one another, in non-cooperative and competitive environments. Middles become isolated from one another when they should be working together to coordinate system processes.

How can we have greater empathy for Middles?

If we are able to see into Middle's world, we have a better understanding of why their responses are often non-committal. Middle doesn't have what Tops ask for, and because Middle would have to go to someone else to get it; it's crystal clear that a "simple" request creates conflicting demands, being pushed and pulled.

And if we are able to see into Middle's world, we might come up with more effective strategies for working with Middle to help Middle feel valued.

Challenge

How can we acknowledge the conflicting demands and how it feels to being pushed and pulled, rather than making it worse?

How can we support Middle in getting what they and the Tops and the Bottoms need?

How can we reduce the pushing and pulling rather than increase it?

What is life like as a Customer?

Adapted from the work of Barry Oshry

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When interacting with Customers, we are not just dealing person to person: we are dealing with people living in – and sometimes struggling to survive in a world where their voice often goes unheard.

They are not getting the attention they feel they deserve; they are shunted from one person to another; products and services are not coming to them as fast as they want, at the level of quality they want, and at a satisfactory price. Customers often feel done-to by nonresponsive delivery systems and their resulting disgruntlement with the system keeps them from being active partners in helping the system produce the products and services they need. Instead the system and the customer end up producing results that nobody wants.

Throughout the system there is personal stress, relationship breakdowns.

How can we have greater empathy for Customers?

If we are able to see into the Customer's world, we have a better understanding of why our Customer reacted to our nice gesture with anger and sarcasm. Customer was not interested in a tour of the facility. Customer was not interested in coffee. Customer was not interested in completing our Customer satisfaction questionnaire. Customer was only interested in quality service, and quality service was not forthcoming.

And if we are able to see our Customer's situation, we may be better able to develop the relationship both we and Customer want. How do we decrease Customer's experience of neglect rather than increase it?

What's the impact of not seeing the system?

Adapted from the work of Barry Oshry

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- We fall out of the possibility of partnership with one another;
- We misunderstand one another;
- We make up stories about one another;
- We have our myths and prejudices about one another;
- We hurt and destroy one another;
- We become antagonists when we could be collaborators;
- We separate when we could remain together happily;
- We become strangers when we could be friends;
- We squander potential

What are the significant blind spots, when we see our part of the system but not the whole?

Blinkered

We see what is happening with us but not what's happening elsewhere; we don't see what others' worlds are like, the issues they are dealing with, the stresses they are experiencing. We don't see how our world impacts theirs and how this impacts ours or how all the parts influence one another. We don't see our systems as wholes, as entities in their environment and we don't see the processes of the whole as the whole struggles to survive.
We see fixed positions battling fixed positions, but we don't see the uncertainty underlying these positions, the conditions for which there are no obviously correct answers; in our blindness we escape from uncertainty into certainty, from mystery into fixed unassailable positions about how to manage our responsibility in the Top world, our vulnerability in our Bottom world, our pushing and pulling in our Middle world. We come together in a world of Dominants and Others.

Judging

We fail to understand one another; we develop stereotypes of one another, we take personally much that is not personal, and, as a consequence, many potentially productive contributions are lost to the system.
We tend not to see ourselves in systemic relationships, but in relationships with individuals, it becomes about them, their personality and their issues and not about us. It's 'them and us 'the organisation' and other unhelpful gross generalisations where we don't take personal responsibility.

Stuck in the here and now

We see the present but not the past; we know what we are experiencing now but not what has led to this experience, we know our satisfactions and frustrations, our feelings of closeness and distance, the issues and choices and challenges we are currently facing. All of this we experience in the present but we don't see the history of the present, the story of our system that has brought us to this point in time. As a result we misdiagnose the current situation, and in our efforts to solve system problems we fix what doesn't need to be fixed and fail to fix what does.