

Sense-Making and the Problems of Learning from Experience: Barriers and Requirements for Creating Cultures of Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will show how the nature of experience and the human process of sense-making make it difficult to create cultures of collaboration. The chapter introduces the notion of interpersonal mush, the normal condition in organizations that makes creating cultures of collaboration difficult even amongst well intentioned people who want to collaborate. The remedy for this is interpersonal clarity. Gaining interpersonal clarity, however, requires people to interact in self-differentiated ways and to have organizational learning conversations. The process of a learning conversation is described and 13 cultural assumptions required for collaborative relationships based on interpersonal clarity are offered.

INTRODUCTION

This ideas in this chapter come from 30 years of working with and studying business organizations attempting to foster greater collaboration and the difficulties they encountered. In many chapters in this book we see that collaboration is a complicated relationship that requires ongoing maintenance to sustain itself. When we talk about building *cultures* of collaboration, we are interested in creating environments that will sustain those kinds of relationships over the long term. It's not enough that collaboration occurs episodically in facilitated gatherings, it needs to be part of the day to day experience of people for it to be part of the *culture*. This chapter rests on the premise that a culture of collaboration is one where certain basic assumptions are shared (Schein, 1992) including those that are required for the maintenance of collaborative relationships. I'll begin with a story about a workgroup that wants to be collaborative, whose manager describes it as collaborative, but over time has not been able to implement the maintenance processes required for real collaboration to take hold.

Lynette's Story

This story takes place in a business unit whose manager prides himself on their teamwork and collaboration. In their weekly meeting Lynette, a new manager of the customer service group, describes her unit's poor performance results and what she intends to do to improve them. As she

talks other managers listen politely and a few ask some questions “for clarification.” At the end of her presentation the boss thanks her, encourages the rest to pitch in with solving the problems, says he looks forward to reviewing the results of her plans next quarter, and the meeting moves on. But many things have not been said. More than one manager at the meeting does not really agree with Lynette’s analysis of the problems but says nothing about it. Some say nothing to avoid embarrassing Lynette, others to avoid being seen as quarrelsome. Doug wonders if Lynette is competent and really understands the situation. Marlene believes Lynette knows perfectly well what is going on but has chosen not to talk about the whole story to protect people in her department. Bruce thinks Lynette is trying to protect herself by covering up the real problems in her unit. Sondra thinks Lynette is well intentioned but taken advantage of by her employees. Others have other thoughts and opinions which they keep to themselves.

After the meeting, some of them get together in smaller gatherings, over coffee or lunch, and conversation turns to what they think is really going on in Lynette’s department, what Lynette is really going to do about it, and why she is saying some things about it, but not others. Differing opinions are examined and discussed and in future interactions with Lynette people look for tips and clues to support or refute different opinions about her real thoughts and feelings. In time, these managers come to develop firm opinions about Lynette’s real motivations and competence. None of this is ever discussed or checked out with Lynette. Over the next few months an image of who Lynette is, her strengths and weaknesses, her motivations and agenda, develop amongst each of the smaller groups and these guide future interactions with Lynette.

Lynette is fully aware of what is going on in her department and has some excellent ideas about what to do about it. Due to perceptions she had developed of her current boss before becoming his subordinate, however, she believes it is not a good idea to be completely truthful, especially since some of his behaviors are part of the problem. She is a little surprised by the lack of cooperation she is receiving from her peers. They’re nice and verbally supportive but she notices the lack of follow through on things she thought they had agreed to. She attributes this to everyone being overworked, lack of resources and forgetfulness, unaware that they are actually concerned with the accuracy of her analysis of the problems and the motivations behind her plans. Why waste energy and resources on a doomed effort is the thinking behind much of the non-cooperation.

After months of frustration with the slowness at which others are moving, at another meeting she brings up her need for more support from others to improve performance. A certain nervous tension fills the room and her boss, a “team player,” moves quickly to smooth things over. Lynette’s complaint is not examined in much detail and everyone professes their willingness to be more supportive. While they are well intentioned, Lynette’s co-worker’s

behaviors, and the beliefs behind them, don't really change. A cycle of lunchtime conversations, unexamined assumptions, and avoidance of issues results in continued mediocre results and increasing stress from all the gossip and politics at work.

Interpersonal Mush vs. Interpersonal Clarity

If this appears at all familiar to you, then you understand the territory of this chapter. I believe that in this story lies the basis of group and organizational dysfunction and the inability of well intentioned, smart people to create the collaborative work cultures they say they want. I describe this group as living in *interpersonal mush*. Interpersonal mush occurs when peoples' understanding of each other is based on fantasies and stories they have made up about each other. I will argue that, over time, interpersonal mush diminishes the capacity for collaboration. I will describe how *interpersonal clarity*, the antidote to interpersonal mush, is the basis for sustaining long-term collaboration. By *collaboration* I mean a relationship in which two or more people are committed to the success of whatever project or process they are jointly engaged in and use assumptions and behaviors consistent with interdependence while pursuing those outcomes.

The model I will describe echoes a stream of thinking about organizational learning (Argyris and Schon, 1974, 1996, Schutz, 1994, Senge, 1990, Short, 1991, Torbert, 1973, 1981) that emphasizes the need for trust and authenticity in maintaining effective working relationships. It blends social constructionism, cognitive psychology, and family systems therapy to offer a perspective on why so little authenticity is found in normal working relationships and a novel, practical solution for increasing clarity and promoting group and organizational learning. I will begin by describing two aspects of normal cognitive functioning that I think create interpersonal mush and diminish the capacity for collaboration: the nature of experience and the nature of sense-making. I will then describe why sustainable collaboration requires interpersonal clarity, what makes it difficult to achieve, and a process for increasing it. I'll conclude by offering 13 "shared assumptions" that, when present in a culture, support interpersonal clarity. I will mainly talk about this in the context of work organizations, though I think it applies to all systems of collective action.

WE CREATE OUR OWN EXPERIENCE

We have at least two very different ways of using the word experience in the English language. One refers to things that happened to us in the past, things we put on our resumes. The other refers to the moment-to-moment stream of perceptions, emotions, desires and observations going through us. In this article I will be using the word experience exclusively in the latter sense. From this perspective, experience only happens in the here and now. Things that happened in the past are memories of experience. I further define experience as

consisting of four elements: observations, thoughts, feelings and wants (Bushe 2001). At any moment a person can be aware (or only partially aware) of the totality of the experience they are having: the things they see and hear, the perceptions and cognitions they are having, the sensations and emotions taking place in their bodies, and the desires and motivations animating these.

As people read this chapter each will be having a unique experience – a multi-threaded stream of observations, thoughts, feelings and wants – that is different from others. Some of that moment-to-moment experience will be related to this chapter and some to each person's environment, history, overall interest in this topic, recent coffee consumption, and so forth. The same thing happens in every interaction. As the interaction takes place, each person has a personally unique experience.

In a group of people, during the same event, the experience of each person is different. Sometimes dramatically so. Most of the managers I have worked with will quickly agree this happens, but relatively few have thought through the implications for collaborative relationships. Perhaps the most important implication is that experience is not what happens to people, but what they do with what happens to them (Short, 1998). Events occurring outside the person combine with internal cognitive maps, biases, emotional states, and motivations that result in their moment-to-moment experience. So each person, in effect, creates their own experience. This generates a dilemma for people trying to collectively learn from their experience together. As many chapters in this book demonstrate, collaboration only endures when partners learn about and adapt their relationship in an ongoing manner.

Learning from experience is often framed as an attempt to analyze the past in order to develop conceptualizations that will better guide future actions (e.g., Kolb, 1984). If each person is continuously having a personally unique, self-created experience, then how do we decide which experience to analyze? Who is having the right experience? What are the important thoughts, feelings, and wants for the people in the group to have? Learning from collective experience is a lot more complicated than reflecting on individual experience. Later, I offer a different image of learning from experience, with a different process and purpose for it.

I believe that one reason why formal, hierarchical structures are so prevalent is that they solve the problem of who is having the right experience – the boss is having the right experience. Cultures of collaboration are inherently based on a different logic, where each person's experience has equal status and people are supposed to come to agreement through interaction and mutual adjustment. Without an understanding of the nature of experience and how interpersonal mush is created and overcome, the array of experiences occurring at any one moment creates conditions for misunderstandings, poor alignment and increasing distrust. I believe this is one reason why so many

“successful” experiments in creating collaborative work systems don’t, over time, fulfill their promise (Heller, Pusic, Strauss & Wilpert, 1998; Weiss & Hughes, 2005). To create cultures of collaboration we need to figure out how to organize collective action while recognizing everyone will be having a different experience and treating everyone’s experience as legitimate as anyone else’s.

THE NEED FOR SELF DIFFERENTIATION

Another serious impediment to clarity and collaboration occurs when people hold others responsible for their experience. When I blame you for my feelings I’m holding you responsible for my experience. Instead of operating with the assumption that I am creating my experience of you, I’ll either try to avoid you (so I won’t have those feelings) or try to get you to change so I can have a better experience. Well intentioned attempts to discuss and work out interpersonal problems don’t often make relationships better if people are holding one another responsible for their own experience. The resulting frustration can lead people to think that such conversations are not useful (they’re right) and reduce future attempts to clear things up.

If those attempting to build cultures of collaboration hold themselves responsible for others’ experiences, which seems to me to be fairly prevalent, they will try to “fix” it when others are having “bad” ones. Taking responsibility for other people’s experience is a dilemma for those building cultures of collaboration because it has positive and negative effects. On the negative side, many people don’t like it when others try to fix their experience. By "fix your experience" I mean giving you a pep talk when you are afraid, trying to make you happy when you are sad, trying to get you to see things differently when you feel remorse, explaining why you shouldn’t want something you are frustrated about, and so on. When one person tries to fix another’s experience it creates a transactional imbalance where the one doing the fixing is “parent”, or “together” and the one being fixed is “child” or “needing help.” The person being "fixed" can feel violated, defensive, or one-down, and resolve to be less forthcoming about their experience in the future. Then there are other people who like it when others look after their experience. They are quite willing to snuggle into a relationship where, over time, real interdependence is replaced by more or less virulent forms of co-dependence. In either direction, the motivation to get clear about our different experiences wanes, and as discussed below, interpersonal mush increases and reduces the ability to maintain collaboration over time.

The dilemma is that personal effectiveness requires learning about the impact one has on others and revising one’s behavior to have the effect one wants. To be effective people need to learn about the experience they create in others, work to get their meaning across with minimal distortion, and check to find out if the message received was the message intended. Since personal effectiveness increases one's capacity for collaboration, collaborators face the

paradoxical dilemma that sustainable collaboration requires both taking responsibility for other people's experience and not taking responsibility for other people's experience.

In practice, the way out of this dilemma seems to require attaining a state of self-differentiation in relationships (Bowen, 1978). A self-differentiated interaction is one in which you are at once both connected to and separate from the other. You are connected enough to be interested in and listen to the other's experience, but separate enough to not be emotionally hooked and to know your own thoughts, feelings, and wants independent of the other person. Self-differentiation rests on the ability to be aware of your own experience and to be curious about others in a non-attached way. Valuing and practicing self-differentiation, especially by leaders, appears to be foundational to organizations in which clarity flourishes (Short, 1991). If people are too connected to each other, holding others responsible for their experience or themselves responsible for other people's experience, they will be too afraid to tell and hear the truth of anyone's experience as it is too threatening to the relationship. If they are too separate and don't pay attention to the experience of others they will neglect the maintenance that collaborative relations need. Self-differentiation is the basis for leadership that can create interpersonal clarity and support sustained collaborative relationships. (Bushe 2001b, 2002).

WE MAKE UP STORIES ABOUT EACH OTHER'S EXPERIENCE

The second, related problem we face in creating cultures of collaboration is that we are all sense-making beings (Weick, 1995). All of us work at making sense of whatever is important to us until we are satisfied. In practice, we make up stories about other people's experience to fill in the gaps of what we know, or think we know.

In Lynette's story that began this chapter, Lynette's colleagues are trying to make sense of her behavior. Notice a few common elements of sense-making processes. One is that her actions are being placed in a larger context; the perceptions people have about the problems in her area. In order to "make sense" of something, it has to fit with what people already believe to be true, the bigger picture. Another is that what she doesn't say or do is given just as much scrutiny as what she does say and do. Nonverbal actions are given meaning. Notice that people are making up fantasies about her experience, about what she is thinking, feeling and wanting. Lynette is, of course, also sense-making about the others. For example, she has a story about why people aren't following up on agreements. She sees her boss based on past perceptions she has of him. To be satisfied with our sense making, current stories have to fit with past sense-making. Finally, people are talking to others to try and make sense of Lynette. This is one of the key barriers to creating cultures of collaboration: where there is interpersonal mush, people rarely go to

the person they are trying to make sense of to check out their stories. Instead they seek out third parties. When the event they are trying to understand is new or different they seek out someone else to help make sense of it. They may seek out others in the organization or others outside the organization such as a spouse or close friend.

The sense-making process is over when the person has a story that he now treats as “the truth.” He no longer treats the story as a possible scenario but as “what happened” and he aligns his future perceptions and actions based on these “facts” unless new information surfaces that forces him to revise his story. If the new information is vague and ambiguous, however, it can be easy to ignore or distorted it to fit.

SO WE END UP IN INTERPERSONAL MUSH

Interpersonal mush is an attribute of an interaction. It exists when two or more people interact based on stories they have made up about each other but not checked out. Given the nature of experience and our compulsion to make sense of those around us, interpersonal mush is the normal, every day, taken-for-granted climate in which most people live, at home and at work (Bushe, 2001). Interpersonal mush makes it difficult, perhaps impossible, to create a culture of collaboration even among well intentioned people motivated to collaborate.

Interpersonal mush happens when people don't describe the “truth of their experience” and they don't inquire into other people's experience but, instead, make up a story about it. For the most part this happens because people are afraid of negative repercussions if they do tell the truth of their experience. These include things like hurting other people's feelings, being misunderstood, causing others to act defensively, receiving demands to justify their experience, and being negatively judged for the experience they are having. Since people don't normally describe all or most of their experience, others are compelled to make it up.

Sense-making in an environment of interpersonal mush might be neutral if we were as likely to err on the “positive” as on the “negative.” Theoretically, it's possible that the story one person makes up about another has them being more courageous, more concerned, more honest, more trustworthy than they really are. Sometimes this happens and people are “put on a pedestal” that doesn't really fit. But that isn't often what happens. It is an unfortunate truth that the stories people make up tend to be more “negative” than the reality. In a vacuum of information, people tend to assume the worst, and this is particularly true in work organizations. The result of interpersonal mush is that what people believe about the organizations they work in, and the people they work with, is often worse than the reality. In my 30 years of consulting and studying organizations I find that executives are often seen as more

heartless and cruel than they really are. Organizations are often seen as more political and unbending than they are. Co-workers are often seen as more insensitive and uncaring than they are. Subordinates are often seen as lazier and more careless than they are. This is one reason why, in toxic environments, getting people to tell each other and listen to each other's experience is almost always a powerfully positive intervention (e.g., Rosenberg, 2004)

There are numerous negative impacts from interpersonal mush (Bushe, 2001). One particularly related to collaboration is the impact on making and keeping agreements. When people who work together don't tell the truth of their experience organizational meetings have the following character. In formal sessions things get said, lists get made, decisions agreed upon. Then people meet in small groups outside the meeting with trusted others to talk about what they really think and feel and want about the topics discussed in the meeting. These are things they don't believe would be OK to say out loud during meetings, usually doubts, concerns and questions about what was discussed. Under conditions of interpersonal mush, what appear to be agreements and consensually made decisions don't get implemented very well, if at all, because people haven't really committed to them. The lack of follow through decreases trust people have in each other, which feeds the interpersonal mush, and on it goes.

INTERPERSONAL CLARITY IS THE ANTIDOTE

Interpersonal clarity is a state in which each person is aware of their own experience, the other's experience, and the differences between them. In practice that means she knows what she observes, thinks, feels, and wants, she's listened to the him describe what he observes, thinks, feels and wants and he has listened to what she observes, thinks, feels and wants without either of them trying to change the other's experience.

The reason collaboration needs interpersonal clarity is that ongoing collaboration requires each person:

- to explore his own *thinking and observing* and that of others and understand similarities and differences in vision, strategies, goals objectives, mental maps (Argyris & Schon, 1996). The more such things are on the table for inspection, the greater the ability to find real alignment and support mutual success.
- to be honest with themselves and others about what they *want* without thinking that simply stating it makes others, especially leaders, responsible for fulfilling it. All forms of win/win conflict resolution and problem solving require clarity about needs and interests in finding successful solutions (Fisher & Ury & Patton, 1991).
- to be honest with themselves and others about what they *feel* because people react to each other and make decisions about what to say and do

based on what they feel and what they think the other feels (Barret & Salovey, 2002).

Interpersonal clarity is not the same thing as being “open and honest”. While many prescriptions for building trust and collaboration advise people to be open and honest I don’t think that advice has been well thought through. The reason people think being open and honest is risky is that they equate it with being honest about their judgments or expressing their feelings. Both of these can be damaging to work relationships. Hurling judgments at others is rarely useful for building any kind of relationship and more often leads to hard feelings and deterioration in relationships. That’s why people learn not to be open and honest in the first place. Expressing feelings, where the feeling is embodied by the person (e.g., hugging others when happy, crying when sad, storming about when angry) in non-intimate relationships can push people away because of the power strong feelings can have on irrational behavior. Interpersonal clarity is not about being intimate – telling others about your life and your hopes and dreams, expressing the fullness of your being in their presence.

Interpersonal clarity is about being transparent, about letting others know what your in the moment experience (observations, thoughts, feelings and wants) is so they will make up more accurate stories about you. It’s about calmly and dispassionately describing (not expressing) what you are feeling. It’s about putting on the table the observations and mental maps that are leading you to your judgments without assuming that your judgments and maps are “the truth” or that the other person has the same observations or maps as you.

If they are to have a stab at truly supporting mutual success – the purpose of collaboration – collaborators need to be clear about all the elements of experience, what each observes, thinks, feels, and wants. Creating a relationship where people are willing to tell each other the truth of their experience requires assuming that everyone is having a different experience, everyone has a right to their own experience, that we are not responsible for each other’s experience and that through being transparent with each other we can find real agreement and alignment. No matter how skilled or aware a person is, they can’t stop themselves from sense-making and inevitably interpersonal mush creeps into the relationship. Cleaning out the mush is crucial for the maintenance of a collaborative relationship and that requires a periodic, concerted effort such as an organizational learning conversation.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING GETS US THERE

An organizational learning conversation is a process of talking and listening to each other until interpersonal clarity is achieved (Bushe, 2001). I wrote my first paper on organizational learning as a doctoral student in 1979. It wasn’t very grounded and I spent many years looking for instances of learning that were truly organizational, where what was learned didn’t reside only in some

individuals but rather was encoded into the organization itself (Duncan & Weiss, 1979). This led me to think about what is an organization. Is an organization its buildings and machinery? Few would say so. Is it its strategy and goals? Strategies and goals come and go and organizations persist. Is an organization its people? A popular cliché but hardly true – people come and go and the organization remains the same. I've come to conclude that an organization is its patterns of organizing (Hedberg, 1981, Herbst, 1962), the patterns of interaction at work that take place day in and day out. These patterns are maintained by the conversations that take place (and don't take place) and the meanings people construct out of their interactions. If a team or organization really learns and changes, the change is manifested in those patterns of interaction, otherwise people will say "nothing changed."

What's learning? Learning is the acquisition and use of new knowledge that comes from an inquiry of some sort. New knowledge that comes without inquiry is revelation, not learning. Learning requires use of the knowledge acquired for its effects to be sustained, perhaps to even say that an episode of learning has taken place (Kolb, 1984). Learning should be evident in the changes we and others experience from its use.

Combine the above definitions of learning and organization and I propose that organizational learning occurs when two or more people inquire in a way that results in new knowledge and alters their patterns of organizing. What I call an organizational learning conversation does that. In it, people (usually two but sometimes more) take turns describing their experience (observations, thoughts, feelings, and wants), and listening to the other's, usually about some pattern of organizing that is unsatisfactory to one or both. They use the conversation to obtain deeper insight into their own experience, a grounded sense of the other's experience, and figure out how they are each creating their own unsatisfactory experience. By doing so they clear out the interpersonal mush and replace it with interpersonal clarity; very often this in itself leads to a positive change in the relationship and the resolution of whatever problem motivated the conversation in the first place.

Here's an example of a learning conversation of a team living in the kind of interpersonal clarity that sustains a culture of collaboration. As I play back this interaction for you, I will describe in the right hand box the organizational learning skills they are using to achieve interpersonal clarity

An Example:

It has been four months since the President, Pierre, declared his and the Board's intent to change the sole emphasis the organization has had for the past ten years on product A and introduce a new product, B. As he sits in a meeting of his executive committee, Pierre is worried that Stan, the vice-president of the unit responsible for manufacturing Product A, is resisting this

change. He was very unhappy by Stan’s performance at yesterday’s Board meeting, where he seemed confused and not in line with the new strategy, and concerned by the negative reaction some Board members voiced toward Stan once he left the room. He values Stan who has been an outstanding performer for many years but realizes that he really doesn’t know what Stan thinks about the change in strategy. As the discussion turns to the new strategy, the President takes leadership in being transparent about his own experience and seeking clarity about Stan’s:

<p>Pierre: “Stan, the Board meeting yesterday raised confusion for me and I want to get clear with you about where each of us stands on the Product B strategy. I raise this here because it effects all of us and we all need to be clear on what each of us thinks about this. So let me begin. I was concerned by your apparent confusion yesterday since I thought we had discussed the new product strategy fully and were all in complete agreement. It raises in my mind some doubts as to whether you really support the product B strategy and, frankly, I’m starting to be concerned that you might resist it because you’re afraid it will take resources away from product A. I want you to be clear about where you stand on this and I want us to find a way for you to feel fully behind both product A and B.”</p>	<p>Notice how Pierre does not lead with the judgments he has made about Stan’s performance or his sense-making. Instead he describes his observations, feelings and wants and puts his sense-making (doubts about Stan’s support for product B) into a context that leaves him open to hearing something different – he is describing his experience in a way that invites the other to describe theirs as well.</p>
<p>Stan, who is visibly disturbed by Pierre’s remarks, does not respond to Pierre’s statements but asks questions to get more clarity about Pierre’s perceptions before reacting to what he is hearing.</p> <p>Stan: “Could you tell me what, exactly, I did that caused you concern at the meeting?”</p> <p>Pierre: When you were fielding questions you made a number statements that are contrary to the strategy the Board has endorsed. For example, when Brian asked about the marketing strategy you talked about building on the brand recognition of Product A when we already decided it’s better to keep the two products distinct in our clients eyes!”</p> <p>Stan: “Any other things?”</p>	<p>Notice that Stan does not respond to or try to change Pierre’s experience before he fully understands it. This seems to be critical to successful learning conversations – one person tries to fully explore and understand the other’s experience before they in any way respond to it. Doing this requires a fairly high degree of self-differentiation – not</p>

<p>Pierre: “Well, yes, your response to Marilyn about product launch and what you said to Herscht about expected cost of capital were not what we had agreed to.”</p> <p>Stan: “Just so I’m clear, Pierre, can you tell me what you think I said and what we’ve agreed to?”</p> <p>Pierre described what he heard Stan say at the meeting and what he thinks was wrong with what Stan said.</p> <p>Stan: “OK, I think I’m clear on what you’re unhappy about but before I react to what you’ve just said Pierre, I just want to check if there are any other reasons why you think I might not be fully behind the change?”</p> <p>Pierre: “Well, I guess I was also taken aback a week or so ago with a conversation I had with Barbara, (one of Stan’s direct reports) who seemed to have some pretty confused fears about what effects this change will have on your department. Then I noticed a similar set of thoughts coming from Kevin, another of your managers. It got me wondering just how much of that is coming from you.”</p> <p>Stan: “Were they talking about having to shift people to the new business unit? (Pierre nods.) Yeah - I know what you’re talking about. Anything else causing you to wonder where I’m at”?</p> <p>Pierre: “No, that’s about it.”</p>	<p>taking responsibility for Pierre’s experience and getting bent out of shape if Pierre is not having the experience Stan would prefer.</p> <p>By first exploring Pierre’s experience Stan uncovers more information (about conversations with Stan’s subordinates) that might not have come up if all they talked about was the Board meeting and this 1) helps him understand Pierre’s sense-making and 2) turns out later to be crucial information for the whole group. Notice also that by trying to understand Pierre’s experience issues that are ultimately more important surface – this would not have happened if this had been framed as a problem to be solved – how to get Stan to do better at Board meetings.</p>
<p>Stan: “Ok, well let me start by saying I’m somewhat taken aback by all this. I had no idea that things went sideways at the Board meeting so I guess I’m glad you’re telling me about it and I do want you to know that I’m fully behind Product B. Let me deal with the meeting issues first. With Herscht I think I must of just not gotten my thoughts out clearly because I agree with what you are saying about our financing and how much debt we’re willing to take on. But I have to tell you that I</p>	<p>Stan begins by describing his here and now experience – thoughts, feelings and wants - so that whatever sense-making others are doing about this interaction will be more accurate. Then he responds to what Pierre</p>

<p>am confused about our marketing strategy and launch plans because I thought we had decided to build on the brand recognition and tie in with Product A.”</p>	<p>has just said and describes his thoughts and feelings.</p>
<p>Pierre: “No, no – that was decided at least a month ago.”</p> <p>Robert: “I have to tell you Pierre, I’m with Stan on that one - I thought the opposite as well.”</p> <p>Susan: “I didn’t know a decision had been made.”</p> <p>Pierre: “I don’t understand this, we talked about this issue for weeks and then at the last meeting of the Board’s Strategy Committee a decision was made to keep the two products separate and distinct in our sales campaign.”</p> <p>Robert: “Well I remember the discussions but I thought we were all leaning toward product tie in. I don’t remember hearing that the Strat Committee had made a decision.”</p> <p>Errol: “I knew about it from the meeting you had with the marketing group, Pierre, but I don’t know if it ever came up here.”</p> <p>Pierre: “Oh hell, I thought I had announced that at our last meeting.”</p> <p>Pierre tells the group about the decision made by the Board’s Strategy Committee and provides their rationale. A discussion ensues and it becomes clear that this is the first time the group has heard about and discussed this decision.</p>	<p>Here we see one big reason why it so useful for individuals to have learning conversations in front of their teams. Many people prefer to have this conversations in private, if at all. But real collaboration and organizational learning requires a willingness to have these kinds of conversations out in the open where the variety of experiences can be surfaced and integrated. It just takes a higher degree of self-differentiation for Stan to be able to remain calm and listen when such a potentially embarrassing interaction begins.</p>
<p>Stan: “To finish off with the issues you were bringing up Pierre, it’s true that people in my unit are afraid that they are going to lose resources to Product B. I don’t think it’s going to be nearly as drastic as some fear, but obviously some resources are going to be redirected and we haven’t yet decided what this is going to be. Frankly, I think the</p>	<p>Having gotten interpersonal clarity about the experience Stan and Pierre had about the Product B strategy, they can now explore the real issues</p>

sooner we decide that the better because the uncertainty is fueling a lot of speculation and there's not a lot I can tell folks to calm them down. But you need to understand that as far as I'm concerned bringing on Product B is absolutely essential to the future health of our company and I am 100% behind it."

Pierre: "I'm glad to hear that Stan, but why are your people not on the bus too?"

Stan: "Oh, I don't think anyone questions the wisdom of moving into the Product B space, Pierre, it's just that no one's sure what the ramifications for Product A will be and that is creating a lot of rumors and unfounded gossip. Last week someone asked me if we were closing down the Product A unit!"

Pierre; "That's ridiculous! Product A is the core of this company. Isn't that obvious?"

Stan: "I think it is to us but apparently there is some confusion in the ranks."

Errol: "I have to agree with Stan, Pierre. A couple of days ago I overheard a conversation in the cafeteria where some people were guessing how Product Unit A was going to be reorganized."

Stan: "I think the buzz coming from below is causing some of the concerns you are hearing from my managers Pierre."

Pierre: "Are any of the rest of you picking this up?"

The group launches into a discussion about the effects of the organization's culture, with its 10 year history solely focused on product A, on implementing the new strategy. Some of this is news to Pierre and together they develop a picture of a pattern of misperceptions and misguided fears that are surfacing in the organization. Everyone affirms that Product A is still the backbone of the company and a new emphasis on product B should not have to mean a decrease in support for product A.

underlying those experiences. Here we see a leader, Pierre, willing to hear and explore experiences that are different from his own and in that process, creating a space where real collaboration can flourish.

Imagine what might have happened if they did not have this conversation? Pierre would have developed doubts about Stan's commitment and probably continued to gather ever more data to support his fears. He would have thought the team was on board with the marketing strategy, not realizing they'd not discussed it. And perhaps most importantly, the group would not have developed a common understanding of the unwarranted fears and rumors swirling through the organization and been able to take action to ameliorate it. It is through their willingness to be clear about their experience with each other that they can truly support the success of the process (introduction of new Product B) they are jointly engaged in, which is what

<p>Pierre: “We better do something to clear up the confusion we’ve created. I think Collette’s team on resourcing Product B is just about finished. I’ll ask her to speed up and we can use their report to make some clear announcements throughout the company that will end the uncertainties about who is going to be working where. Susan, can you get the communications people geared up for this? I want to make it a priority. We don’t need a lot of unfounded fears and rumors in the way of getting Product B to market quickly and effectively.</p>	<p>collaboration is all about.</p>
<p>Pierre: I’m sure glad we had this conversation though I’m a little sorry that it started from my misgivings about you Stan. I see that I have some responsibility for what happened at the Board yesterday so I guess I owe you an apology.”</p> <p>Stan. “Thanks Pierre but I have to take some responsibility for not having checked out my facts before the presentation. I wonder if we can huddle before Board meetings in the future just to make sure I have my ducks in line.”</p> <p>Pierre: “I think that would be a good idea.”</p>	<p>The learning conversation comes to a close with Stan and Pierre describing what they have learned about how they created this experience for themselves and making agreements about how they want to interact in the future.</p>

Having learning conversations that turn interpersonal mush into clarity requires some skills in addition to the capacity for self-differentiation. In general these are awareness of one’s experience, an ability to describe it to others in ways that avoid defensiveness and reactivity, an ability to inquire into other people’s experience that helps them understand their own experience and makes them willing to tell their truth and an ability to maintain an appreciative mind-set, to look for the positive intent behind what might appear to be negative actions (Bushe, 2001).

CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS REQUIRED FOR INTERPERSONAL CLARITY IN ORGANIZATIONS

There are a number of assumptions that, if broadly held, support the creation and maintenance of a collaborative culture based on interpersonal clarity. I identify thirteen below. My experience is that if people do not hold and act on these assumptions, real collaboration is hard to sustain. To begin with is the assumption that each of us creates his own experience. Even when

we witness the same event, are part of the same interaction, it is useful to assume that we may be having very different thoughts, feelings, observations and wants and not assume that others see it the same way we do.

1. We each create our own experience.
2. In every interaction, everyone is having different experiences.

Collaboration is based on the assumption and behaviors of interdependence, a relationship where people are assumed to have equal rights. Such a relationship can't be sustained if some people's experience is given more status or validity than others or where people try to change each others experiences, no matter how noble their intentions. I might go as far as to argue that sustainable collaboration requires that we fully respect other people's experiences and let them have their own experience, no matter how painful they might appear. That is different, however, from the extreme post-modern position that everyone's experience is equally valid. When it comes to objective issues – things that can be assessed independent of anyone's perceptions – some observations and thoughts may be more valid than others.

3. Everyone has a right to their own experience.
4. Each person's experience has equal status, though when it comes to objective issues, some may be more valid.

When people lack information about the experience of others they are compelled to make up stories to fill in the gaps. Interactions are based on stories people have made up about each other, which they accept as "truth." Over time, these stories tend to become more negative than reality and diminish the ability to collaborate successfully. Interpersonal mush is the normal, taken-for-granted environment in which work relationships (perhaps all relationships) exist unless people actively work at developing interpersonal clarity – a state where each person knows what their own experience is, what the other's experience is, and the difference between them. Holding all experience legitimate, and not trying to change others' experiences when they are being described, supports people's willingness to be clear with each other.

5. If I don't say what my experience is others will make it up and treat it as if it's the truth.
6. Although it takes effort, it's good to be aware of my own in-the-moment experience.
7. It's generally useful to describe my experience to others with whom I want to collaborate and ask them to describe theirs.
8. Though I am compelled to make up a stories about the experience of significant others, I can know and maintain awareness of the difference between what I really know and what I'm making up.
9. By listening to others relate their experience, without trying to change or fix it, I can obtain more accurate information.

One of the things that makes it so difficult to create interpersonal clarity is the tendency to manage relationships by either becoming so closely connected

that I take responsibility for your experience (and/or make you responsible for mine), or being so far apart that I don't even think of considering your experience. Interdependence and collaboration need people to value and practice self-differentiation.

10. I need to work on being sufficiently separate from and connected to the people I want to collaborate with.

One place where this shows up a lot is in managing expression of wants. People can be hesitant to ask others what they want if they think they will then be held responsible for fulfilling them (or fear that others will hold them responsible). So instead of getting clear about what people want, they make it up, and the interpersonal mush deepens. That is different from a negotiation or contract kind of conversation which also needs to take place in a collaborative relationship where you are getting clear on what wants will be satisfied. The most important wants to be clear about are the in the moment wants like what I want from this interaction, what I want you to know about me, the impact I want to be having on you, and so on.

11. To create clarity I have to tell others my wants without expecting them to be satisfied.

Finally, sustained collaboration requires that we learn from our collective experience and that we occasionally take time to inquire into and learn about our patterns of interaction, productive and unproductive, and work toward changing the patterns that are dissatisfying or in some way threaten our collaboration. Sense-making processes being what they are, whenever there is a problem in a work relationship it is often too clear to each person how the others behavior is the problem. If only the other person would change everything would be fine. Such conversations need to be guided by the assumption that since I create my own experience, I am creating the impact you have on me. In any two-person relationship, each is 50% responsible for what is going on.

12. I am creating the impact other people have on me.
13. When I'm having unsatisfactory interactions with someone I want to collaborate with, we need to have an organizational learning conversation.

The approach described in this chapter, which I have used with a high percentage of success for over a decade in a variety of organizations, works because most of the time it is the interpersonal mush that is causing a hoped-for collaborative relationship to fall apart. Clear out the mush -- create interpersonal clarity -- and the problem often goes away.

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