
Professional Reflections – Lessons in Letting Go of Outcome

I was working with a younger colleague on a project to prepare a group of business students to mentor incoming students at university. I had spoken at great length to my colleague about Open Space Technology and specifically about the four principles underpinning it - whoever comes are the right people, whatever happens is the only thing that could have, it starts when the time is right and when it's over it's over - explaining that I like to hold this state of mind in all my work even when not doing an Open Space meeting. My colleague was interested but skeptical, yet agreed to work this way.

As the week progressed, things went really well. On the 4th and final day my colleague gave us all an unexpected gift by creating an exercise for team building that was as difficult as the riddle of the sphinx -- without knowing it. The exercise had two components: 1. Decipher the directions of the game, which then would culminate in 2. playing charades together. The climax was supposed to be charades. To emphasize teamwork he had taken the four lines of directions, translated phrases from them into all of the 11 languages spoken by the different members of the group, cut up the phrases and randomly split them over two envelopes. The two groups would have to work both by themselves and together to get the final directions of the game. We hadn't discussed the exercise at length, but it sounded like fun, let things happen I thought.

At the start he gave each group an envelope saying..."all you need to know is in here." He'd calculated a half-hour to figure to decipher the directions, and then a little less than an hour to play charades and talk about what was learned.

Twenty minutes passed but still no indication that they had figured out the directions. After thirty minutes we got a bit nervous but resolved to wait and miraculously a few minutes later a woman came to us, except it became clear that the question her group had come with was a totally different than what had been written. As we sent her back imploring the group to continue, both of us were worried. My colleague got up to go to the groups and put them straight. He got about halfway, stopped, turned around and said, "no, I'm going to give it time and let them keep working, I'm going to trust that this is what needs to happen."

We sat, and sat, and sat. I was angry with myself; why hadn't I exerted more control over him why did I trust him and not question more? My internal judge was working overtime and I watched my own inner struggle to let it go of the outcome I had anticipated. Fun it wasn't, I could also see my colleague's struggle, his feelings of confusion as the exercise he had planned with so much care

seemed to be turning so bad. After 1,5 hours, the end of the allotted time, we decided to go to the group(s) and see what we should do next.

We arrived just in time to see the whole group of 24, expressions of urgency on their faces, completing the last of 4 sentences on the whiteboard. The lines were logical, they indicated the major elements of the exercise, yet were quite different from the original. We looked at the group and asked..."do you want to play charades or de-brief what happened." A resounding cry of DEBRIEF answered us. As we walked to the main room for the de-brief my colleague whispered, I want you to do this please. I realized I had about 30 seconds let go of all the frustration I was still carrying and believe in my own convictions about allowing whatever emerges to guide the learning. I sat down, took a deep breath and asked...'what did this experience teach you about being a mentor...' Silence then we were totally surprised. It had taught them about the experiences of confusion, of isolation and figuring out how to make sense of new place, they linked this to the experience of their incoming students. It taught them that how when leading a group sometimes your intention leads to unexpected results that you have to manage. It taught them about how they may sometimes need to step up and be active and at other moments step back and be more passive. It gave insight them into their own difficulties as group members and how they can approach this. It even taught them about unconscious processes when we discovered that the "random" sorting of phrases had worked out so that one envelop had only positive words while the other had only negative words. They learned how this unconscious act influenced their experiences of the exercise and how they had to work with this as they progressed.

By the end of the de-brief it seemed to me that this exercise was one of the most important and valuable things we did that week, coming at just the right time, consolidating the many levels of learning. We never played charades. Creating spaces for learning is something I stand for, this reminded me of how hard and of how valuable such learning can be.