

Power Interventions

Power interventions can create space for renewing working methods and culture. The interventions are useful for people in a position of power who are prepared to put that power to use. I distinguish five power interventions. The first two interventions are about how things are and defining limits. They are followed by two interventions that are aimed at persons: switching players and attracting new people. The last intervention involves rewarding desired behaviour.

Articulating Urgency

In 2002, KPN is threatened with liquidation. The board chairman realizes that different decisions have to be made very quickly. He arranges a bridging loan, tells in plain language what the position of the company is and creates a sense of urgency. He also indicates a direction the company will develop in and expresses confidence that the company can survive. KPN shuts down divisions at high speed. KPN has no place any more for 10,000 people. Things become more competitive in all sections. The people who are left do everything possible to make KPN viable. Nobody can hide any more and the

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primary objective is: survive! Thanks to the financial crisis and the urgency to turn the tide, there is scarcely any resistance to the interventions. Everyone understands that something has to happen and they see that the direction the top manager sets out is the only possibility for survival. The effect of the reorganization is increased resilience. The need to survive creates consensus and management supports the strategy focusing on profitable business operations and activities that contribute to profitability in the future. Because the organization is cutting back drastically, people become more visible than before and the rounds of dismissal mean there is no longer anyone else to hide behind.

Articulating the urgency can convince people that a drastic change is absolutely essential. Leaders in cultural change steer by output. Output incorporates the clear articulation of the problem, the formulation of a guiding goal, the definition of the result and indicating the preconditions of the solutions. It is about expressing clearly what is at stake and giving a direction with sufficient room to move so that others can contribute to the goal in their own way. The output gives guidance and vision, formulates the ideal picture and the dream for the future. Leaders who steer by output assume the competence of employees who want to do their bit and whom they can trust. Leaders who articulate the state of affairs are assertive about the problem, the goal that has to be achieved and the preconditions the solution must fulfil.¹

Naming problems also involves formulating a vision that is attainable and generates energy. Problems without a vision result in paralysis. A vision defines the unique identity of a company and thus gives a grip and focus. A vision joins the whole organization together. It is an answer to the question of what the company stands by and goes for. In the vision, product and customer are matched to each other. Naming problems is helped by concrete facts and figures to substantiate the problem and concrete examples that show why things cannot go on the way they are. That is why it is sensible to provide broad insight into the facts and the examples about the performance of the company. Stating how things are can create a sense of urgency.² A shared sense of urgency can stimulate cooperation to change because it breaks through the complacency and creates space to form a vital coalition of people who want to initiate the change and get it further. Creating urgency only happens in companies whose continued existence is

at stake because their market position or their social legitimacy is under pressure. This intervention is not suitable if there are no undeniable facts that underpin the crisis or if customers threaten to walk away because of the story of crisis. This intervention is difficult if there are no leaders who can and want to tell the message or if employees are so stunned by the umpteenth crisis story that they turn their backs on the company.

Leaders can increase the sense of urgency in various ways²:

- Articulate the urgency by gathering information about financial performance and customer satisfaction and sharing it explicitly with others,
- Make important points of weakness evident in comparison with rivals and denounce these points,
- Implement symbolic interventions by removing examples of extravagance and economizing on obvious luxury,
- Discuss the business problems honestly in management sessions, staff meetings, texts and video messages,
- Stimulate people to talk regularly with dissatisfied customers, complaining suppliers and purchasers and grumbling business partners,
- Set objectives for profits, productivity, customer satisfaction and completion times so high that they cannot be achieved with the current working methods and
- Create tension between the current situation and the possible future situation by imagining a vision.

Setting Borders

The director of Quadrant is confronted with inhuman living situations caused by confining mentally impaired people in isolation rooms. This behaviour by the group supervisors is at odds with her own views on humane treatment and it puts the reputation of the institution in danger. She does not want people to be placed in isolation any longer and is more than clear about this: stop isolation. This decision arouses opposition from all layers of the organization. The director holds fast. To add force to her words, she gets rid of the isolation rooms. By making very clear what is unacceptable, she draws a line that provides guidance in the search for other solutions.

Setting borders is working with “unvalues.” It is a method of value steering that directors or leaders use to indicate what they do not want.³ They block specific behaviour and thus create space for employees to look for other work practices. It is a specific way of providing direction and still allowing sufficient room for manoeuvre to arrive at different work practices. The different work practices give rise to other habits and patterns of cooperation. In using “unvalues,” leaders steer by criteria but they keep out of the concrete solution. They leave the search for a solution up to the employees and the professionals. Criteria provide security for the leader in setting boundaries and granting freedom and are a challenge to employees to find a solution. “Unvalues” are important because they concretize abstract goals and are evidence that a leader is taking the problem seriously and wants to work on it. When directors indicate what they do not want, a discussion gets going between directors and professionals about the reason why certain work practices are no longer acceptable. The underlying problems and the “why” question come up and make it possible to hold a meaningful discussion about the issue of what the organization stands for and goes by and the role of employees and professionals in that. This intervention is not recommended if the problem is acute and the solution has already been established, there is a suspicion that employees will not come up with a solution or if conflicts are dragging on between directors and operational staff.

Working with “unvalues” has a number of points for attention:

- Analyze the problem by searching for the cause behind it. Gather as much concrete data and as many concrete incidents as possible that tie in with the day-to-day work practice. Translate these unwanted incidents into a value statement that indicates what is no longer desirable or allowable.
- Be extremely clear in how you formulate “unvalues” and if necessary, press home the statement through interventions in the structure or the technology of the work.
- Avoid giving solutions for how the work should be done and steer by objectives, results and criteria for the execution of the work.
- Be prepared for questions about the why of the decisions and use these questions to enter into discussion about the underlying problems, the values that are important to the work and the identity of the organization.

Changing Social Networks

After a strategic reorientation, the five cluster managers are not capable of implementing the vision and the strategy of Deltaland Hospital. Their focus concentrates too much on the operational side and they feel too attached to their team managers. They do not succeed in giving shape to the vision and making the transition to the team managers so they can get to work on it. Lack of clarity in top management leads to confusion among the middle managers about the meaning of the vision and the strategy. The strategy comes under pressure and the merger stagnates. The Board of Directors decides to appoint new cluster managers from outside the hospital. These managers have experience in health care and they understand hospital care and what is at issue in the workplace. They have leadership qualities and they can get down to it. The members of the new team now complement each other. The one knows how things are and controls the political game. The other is contemplative and makes razor-sharp analyses. A third manager is result-oriented and plays with figures. A fourth has strong communication skills and does not mince his words. The fifth has experience in change processes in hospitals. The new team immediately looks for connection, exchanges insights and comes together. Together they become the leading coalition in the strategic renewal of the hospital.

Changes to the culture of an organization affect the existing method of working, the forms of conduct and entrenched patterns. Managers can break through these entrenched patterns by indicating what they do not want, as could be seen from the earlier discussion. The intervention aims in that case at the existing work practice that is blocked. This involves a change in the game and the rules of play. Entrenched patterns can also be broken by changing players. Changing players is a powerful intervention to break through existing patterns. By bidding farewell to certain players, management sends a signal about behaviour that no longer fits in the new situation. Changing players creates a different game. Introducing new players makes new perspectives available that call up questions about the existing definition of reality. New players also lead to different relationships

and forms of conduct.⁴ It is essential to build a good relationship with the new actors and prevent the new players from being included too easily in the existing play. It is also relevant to appreciate the difference in perspective and the working methods that new players bring in. Because the introduction of new players makes the entrenched patterns less obvious, new players need to be protected against group pressure to conform. The downside of this intervention is that people can become afraid they will be replaced if they do not change or adapt fast enough to the new culture and forms of conduct. This can result in open or covert defensive reactions. This intervention is not practicable if the change of players is not understood by the majority of the staff, the change of players puts the customer relations and the customer network in danger or if the change leads to people becoming afraid of being the next one to go.

Changing players involves

- selecting players who already have the desired values and standards through experience acquired elsewhere,
- making explicit why the old players had to be replaced and how the relationship with the old players was terminated,
- using the external networks of the new players in introducing new experiences and perspectives,
- paying attention to the social connection of the new players with the existing players and supporting the new players in their different views and different working methods and
- introducing and positioning the new players carefully in the existing team and the organization, in order to show support for them openly and express explicit appreciation of the different experiences they contribute.

Appointing New People

The new manager at Philips Recruitment deliberately chooses to appoint new recruiters and team leaders to realize the ambition of the department. The new recruiters and team leaders provide invigoration at Philips Recruitment. They break through old patterns and get the department moving, partly because they were selected for their professional seniority and commercial talent. The new manager, the

team leaders and the senior recruiters show the department how they work together with customers and are thus an example to the others. They turn the thinking back to front, as it were: the customer comes in first place. Their enthusiasm, experience and commercial qualities help. “Fresh blood” is also responsible for a positive atmosphere in the department. The direction is clear, there is an invitation to contribute to it and it is enjoyable to do that with colleagues who want to go for it.

Appointing new people has the same kind of dynamics as changing players. Introducing new players is a relatively simple intervention to bring existing work practices and patterns up for discussion. This creates space for new working methods. New people bring new experiences and qualities. In appointing new people, leaders make clear which qualities and values are relevant to the work. One specific form is introducing a group of young, new employees who introduce new expertise and call the existing ideology and working methods into question. They are people from outside the organization who look, think and work differently and who want to identify with the goals and ambitions of the department and the company.⁵ The idea is that the new people work in positions where they can influence others in the organization. The new players are able to build new coalitions with customers and business partners outside of their own organization. They thus introduce new perspectives and work practices that make it possible to discuss existing work practices. Conditions for this intervention are the availability of resources for appointing new people and the leader himself having sufficient time to supervise new people.

Appointing new people as a cultural intervention requires the following:

- Carefully setting up the recruitment and selection process; the influence of members of the Old Guard must be limited, so that people with different experiences and qualities have a chance.⁶
- Analyzing existing working methods and patterns and checking what kind of input can be used to change these working methods and patterns. Using this analysis as the basis for listing criteria for new people to be appointed.
- Preparing and supervising the new people in making existing work practices discussable by contributing new experiences.

- Protecting new people if they are pressurized by others who want to hold on to the old culture.
- Investing in team development and recognizing and valuing the new input with the invitation to others to experiment with renewal.

Rewarding Behaviour

Unique is an independent operating company of USG People. The company wants to hold on to its staff and increase their commitment. A loyalty programme is developed for this purpose through which employees can earn points every month. If they have a good evaluation at the end of the year, they can use those points for an experience that ties in with their own profile and the cultural core values. Together with UNICEF, Unique supports an educational project in Bolivia. This matches the core value of commitment. The branch that collects the most money for this project will be rewarded with a trip to Bolivia. When the economic crisis also affects the employment agency sector, Unique asks all branches to think up a motto to help the organization through the recession. The director will visit the branch with the best motto for a day to work with them on acquisition for the branch.

Rewarding behaviour makes explicit which type of behaviour is valued in the organization and ties in directly with visible behaviour and the outcomes of that behavior.⁷ Formal recognition and informal appreciation make clear what the important points for attention and priorities are in the behaviour of employees. Differences in appreciation bring to light which people are important and which people receive less recognition.⁸ This intervention is not useful if most employees regard the reward system as unfair or if there is a good chance people will only concentrate on the work that is rewarded and the intrinsic motivation thus decreases.

Rewarding behaviour as a cultural intervention requires:

- criteria for the rewarding of behaviour to match the desired behaviour and underlying values and standards flawlessly,
- the organization not only to provide financial rewards but also formal recognition and visible appreciation of behaviour,

- meaning to be given to the relationship between the desired behaviour and the reward by working with symbols and rituals and
- people to experience the reward system as fair, especially if there is a difference made between people.

Notes and References

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