

Conflict Interventions

A cultural change puts the existing values, habits and forms of conduct under pressure, and tensions and conflicts can arise from this. Tensions and conflicts generate energy. It becomes possible to discuss self-evident truths so that space is created for change. Conflicts and tensions can be a creative source of renewal of deeper values. In this chapter, I discuss the appreciation of difference, making barriers discussable, initiating an iconoclasm, handling conflicts, attacking sacred cows and using humour.

Valuing Differences

Many companies that work on cultural change use instruments to explain team roles and make it possible to discuss differences between team members. Tempo-Team works with four basic colours that stand for dominant personal characteristics: red is for action-oriented, yellow for creativity, green for the one-to-one connection in mutual relationships and blue stands for analysis, a preference for numbers and processes. A questionnaire maps out differences. Those differences can then be discussed. The instrument helps in putting a varied team together but also in creating a connection with customers and colleagues. After all, every personal characteristic has its own benefits

Cultural Change and Leadership in Organizations: A Practical Guide to Successful Organizational Change, First Edition. Jaap J. Boonstra.
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and drawbacks. It also helps in discussions with customers and colleagues: If a customer or colleague is quite blue, how should I address him? The tool is used at Tempo-Team on all levels, from board members to employees. It turns out to be a successful tool in giving feedback and for making it possible to discuss and appreciate differences.

Diversity in teams means that people contribute different perspectives and qualities to a team. This variety can contribute to the strength of organizations if they can make the diversity of talents, views and ambitions productive. Personnel systems that can monitor and mobilize diversity are required. In a team that has a diverse composition, the team members come from different backgrounds and have different needs, preferences, expectations and lifestyles. Making difference discussable can help a team function properly. There are many tools available to make diversity in teams visible and discussable. These tools can be based on motives,¹ lifestyles,² career anchors³ or core qualities.⁴ All these instruments work in more or less the same way. A questionnaire sets out individual qualities or specific characteristics that are then discussed in the team to get a better view of each other's strong and weak sides. The team members then make agreements about forms of conduct and the way they can get the best out of each other and how they can support each other. Making differences visible and discussable is not recommended if there are repressed conflicts or if the situation is not safe enough for holding an appreciative discussion. In that case, it is more sensible to make obstacles discussable, regulate the conflict, switch players or aim the discussion at the performance of tasks of the team.

There are several steps to valuing differences in teams⁵:

- Check whether differences are discussable or whether it is meaningful to use the power of the difference within teams.
- Establish whether discussing differences is an intervention on the level of the entire organization or only within specific teams.
- Check what the team's task is and the role of the team members, in order to establish which instrument is the most appropriate for identifying and listing differences.
- Ask individual team members to fill out a questionnaire or make differences visible and discussable in other ways.
- Organize team meetings to discuss the differences and assess the power of the difference.

Discussing Barriers

During the economic crisis, the staff at Olijslager experience a different style of leadership. Where the style was previously mainly appreciative and coaching, now it is more steering and directive. The combination of changing management style, economic uncertainty, dismissal of employees and growth of the company through takeovers arouses uncertainty. People start to criticize the management. At a meeting of all managers and team leaders, the director deliberately puts the dissatisfaction about the leadership on the agenda. He outlines the major events of the past two and a half years and tells about his own uncertainties and emotions. The wider perspective and the openness lead to understanding. The director shows a documentary film during the meeting, in which a company with a similar culture (person-oriented, little hierarchy, a great deal of freedom) finds itself in a crisis that ends badly. In the film, a division grows between the director and management. The film works like a mirror for the group. “That film showed us the reality. The realization sinks in that the economic crisis can also affect Olijslager. We immediately understood that we were in the wrong mode. If we want to change something, then it was our turn as a group to make a move.” The film anticipates the feeling, imagination and subconscious of the people present. It provides for a shared experience and generates energy for pulling out of the crisis together better.

Making it possible to discuss obstacles or barriers can help in clearing them out.⁶ Barriers can come from negative experiences with previous change processes, a lack of confidence in management, insufficient belief that the intended change is attainable or from defence of the existing culture that offers a certain degree of security. It reveals that uncertainties and emotions can be discussed and that there is a willingness to learn from earlier experiences.⁷ Making it possible to discuss the barriers creates trust in the mutual relationships. Implicit presuppositions that reflect the current culture come to the fore. It is precisely this that makes it possible to enter into a dialogue about the difference between the existing culture and the desired culture.

Several lines of approach are possible when making obstacles discussable:

- Draw up a list of why previous changes led to unsatisfactory results and discuss what can be done to make this change succeed.
- Openly discuss the role of superiors and managers in the change process and set out clearly what their role is in the change.
- Look for a common basis and invest in trust to give shape to the change.

Mirroring Contradictions and Tensions

At Deltaland Hospital, excellent plans were presented in PowerPoint during an away day. The plans showed milestones and programmes that would lead to improvements in the care. In the corridors, it turns out that many a participant does not really have much faith in the whole and many people express the opinion that this plan will of course never succeed. The Board of Directors decides in a second session to relinquish the control and wants to open up behaviour as something that can be discussed. They ask a doctor from their own organization who has no hierarchical qualifications to supervise the process. The key question is how they can trust each and approach each other. After an introduction about the rumours from the corridors, a situation arises in which the medical staff is only busy shooting down the Board of Directors. The Board of Directors does not defend itself or the belief but shows it is vulnerable. The breaking point comes when part of the group stands up and gives feedback to the other group. This is the first time it happens, and it has an effect. Pictures are exchanged on either side. The confrontation of the different groups gives rise to a dialogue that raises consciousness. People express themselves to each other, they listen and they reflect. A situation arises in which the medical staff also want to take a look at themselves and their own role. The “iconoclasm” sees to a connection between the substance of the plans and building on trust. Agreements are made about the contact with each other that is necessary to achieve changes and get plans to succeed.

As an intervention for cultural change, the iconoclasm is especially suitable if groups have a negative picture of each other and communication is as good as impossible. This intervention can also help in value conflicts to reveal the underlying values and look for overarching values. The iconoclasm has been applied successfully in many different situations. The basic model can be adapted to specific situations. Sometimes, the iconoclasm is preceded by discussions with both parties, in order to obtain a better picture of the conflict and to prepare the groups in the meantime for conflict resolution. This intervention is very useful if there is a lot of tension in the organization that needs a release valve or if there is a gap between the top management and the workers. The intervention is not suitable if parties do not want to examine themselves and do not want to present themselves as vulnerable in looking for solutions.

The iconoclasm consists of the following steps:

- An independent supervisor asks the groups whether they like the idea of improving their relationship with each other and solving the problems.
- At the meeting, the supervisor briefly introduces the wish of both groups to solve the problem and improve their relationship, formulates goals, standards and preconditions and creates an open and honest climate for discussion.
- The groups each make a list of their thoughts, attitude, feelings and perception of their own group and a second list with predictions about what the other group will say about them.
- At a plenary meeting, the participants exchange the different pictures of the groups. Participants from the one group are asked only to listen to the presentation of the pictures of the other group and vice versa.
- The two groups split up to answer the question of why the other group sees them that way and what they have discovered about themselves and the other group.
- Another plenary session follows at which the groups exchange their diagnosis. During this discussion, usually all kinds of incorrect perceptions and misunderstandings disappear and the climate for discussion improves significantly.
- The groups now work communally on further analysis of the backgrounds to the conflict, setting priorities for solutions and improvement of the mutual relationship and developing action plans.
- They make an agreement to get together again after some time to discuss the progress.

Regulating Conflicts

At Dutch Railways, a tightly steered cultural programme along with drastic changes to the organization of the work results in fierce conflicts between staff and the board. A new board makes an effort to repair the mutual trust within the company: “Our strategy aims at further improving the quality of the service and products that Dutch Railways offers to our customers. Our strategy demands simplicity and a clear vision of leadership and change. We strive towards an appreciative organization with simplicity as our guiding principle. The most important principles for managing and designing changes are: (1) offering structure in which it is clear what is expected of employees, (2) offering attention by valuing craftsmanship and being sincere with information, (3) listening to people and taking questions seriously, (4) solving problems together, (5) ensuring that all parties concerned know what they can expect and (6) ensuring that employees can enjoy their work without losing the organizational interest from sight. This starting principle is supported by a structural change to bridge the gap between management and operational staff. The staff are organized in small groups with a superior who can add some job-related knowledge. The board chairman supports the building up of constructive labour relations by declaring that he does not want to have to go to the court enterprise division to resolve labour conflicts with the works council during his period on the board.

In order to overcome destructive conflicts and restore trust, Dutch Railways aims at cooperation and conflict regulation.⁸ This is an appropriate intervention if parties have similar interests and goals. Changes to the strategy, structure and culture of a company can result in tensions and conflicts. Cooperation is necessary for a change in cultural values. The intervention starts with strengthening the relationship by developing acceptance and trust. This is possible through the articulation of common interests and emphasizing the mutual dependencies. Showing appreciation of the other and preventing a combative atmosphere from arising reduce the tensions. This intervention cannot be used if the conflicts come from a deep distrust and the parties do not want to talk with each other. In that case, it is more obvious to call in an independent mediator.

Anchor points for conflict regulation are:

- The parties involved regard conflicts as a communal problem, they emphasize their mutual dependence and they express the desire to look for a solution.
- Parties want to invest in the relationship by expressing themselves appreciatively about the other and expressing confidence that a solution is in each other's interest.
- Personal irritations and each other's weak points can be discussed, which reduces tensions and helps keep cooperation possible.
- Parties are honest in providing information and try to show their own objectives precisely.
- Parties try to understand each other's viewpoints and empathize with each other's position and fall back as little as possible on means of power and "faits accomplis."
- Parties discuss and test possible solutions on the basis of disseminated principles and common criteria.
- Parties are deliberately reticent in binding themselves to one particular solution in order to make overarching solutions possible.
- If necessary, parties appeal to independent experts from outside to come up with new facts.
- If necessary, parties engage an independent mediator to help in decision-making.

Mediation by Independent Parties

A change in the division of ownership can be a painful and emotional process in many family businesses. No less so for Olijslager. When Mrs Olijslager dies, there are no successors in the family who want to run the business. The director expresses the wish to be a shareholder as well as run the operational management. During the subsequent discussions, emotions run high and a situation arises in which the heirs and the director lose their trust in each other. Both parties feel unappreciated by the other after years of hard work. To get out of this deadlock, they call in an independent advisor who specializes in family businesses. The advisor pays a lot of attention to restoring the trust and

getting a dialogue going. In the early stage, he speaks a lot with the people involved in order to gain trust and create space for emotions. The advisor also ensures that emotion, reason and business interest are kept separated. The advisor, as a neutral third party, ensures that understanding comes about between the viewpoints of the heirs and the director. Understanding each other and each other's viewpoints is important to get closer to each other. Once there is clarity about the wishes and interests of both parties, space is also created for a constructive discussion of possible legal structures and division of ownership. When the parties come to agreement on the legal structure, attention can turn again to entrepreneurship and the mutual trust grows.

Conflicts can be solved by negotiating with the help of a third, independent party, such as a mediator or intermediary. For this to be successful, both parties must be motivated to solve the problems and they must both accept the third person as mediator. Mediation using a third party can be used for conflicts between groups or persons. The aim is to achieve contract negotiations in which the parties make new agreements on the mutual relationship and the form of conduct. This method is not suitable if parties differ too greatly in their position of power or if one of the parties is not willing to accept mediation.

Using an independent mediator involves taking the following steps:

- The intermediary discusses with each party whether there is sufficient motivation to solve the conflict and accept the mediator as an independent party.
- He or she explains the method clearly to both parties and asks them to accept and approve the method.
- The intermediary structures the relationship between the parties and formulates the consequences if they do not come to an agreement.
- The intermediary holds separate conversations with each party in order to find out their specific grievances and opinions and gain insight into emotions and the balance of power within the parties. They also investigate what kind of space there is for possible alternative solutions.
- The intermediary tries to move the parties to offer some credit whereby they yield on points that are important to the other party.
- The intermediary stimulates parties to conduct that inspires mutual trust, thus gradually restoring trust.

- After a clear diagnosis of the conflict and insight into possible solutions, the intermediary invites the two parties to a meeting on neutral ground. The intermediary clarifies the most important points of conflict and emphasizes the importance of arriving at a solution. The intermediary presents the preconditions that a solution must satisfy and lays various proposals on the table.
- The two parties negotiate on a final solution, under the supervision of the intermediary. The third party has a procedural role and if desired, can call in expertise and provide supplements to proposals until the negotiation result is acceptable to both parties.
- After a solution is found, the parties agree how they will inform other persons who are involved about the solution. It is important that neither party claims a victory, but that they point out the common interest of the final solution.

Speaking about the Unspeakable

At the Metropolitan Police, it is customary for police officers to be promoted on the basis of seniority. This impedes the advancement of female and ethnic police officers to management positions. In order to break through the traditional white male macho culture and make space for other cultures as well, the police discard the strict promotion policy and introduce an affirmative action policy for female and ethnic officers. This decision results in a great deal of commotion, not only because it restricts the career possibilities of older male officers but above all because this decision is experienced as unfair in a culture where uniformity, legal equality and justice were leading values. By abandoning the sacred cow of seniority, a discussion gets going about the role and position of the police in society and space is created for different cultural values.

Attacking sacred cows puts existing customs and dominant cultural values under pressure. Often, they are cultural features that used to have a purpose but now obstruct the organization and frustrate renewal. By attacking sacred cows and encouraging people to ask questions about it, a discussion gets underway about underlying practices and value patterns. Space is created

for cultural renewal if people experience the need for renewal and see that it is realistic and if that renewal gains support from a wider circle. Attacking sacred cows can sometimes disorient people. It can result in damage to the labour relations and even lead to industrial disputes, certainly if it affects the employment conditions. Some cautiousness is therefore called for.

When attacking sacred cows, it can help to invite people to ask questions, such as:

- How is it that demolishing these customs evokes emotion or anger in you and what would you want to ask about this?
- What answer would you need to let go of the past and make a new start?
- Who would you like to ask these questions to?

Using Humour that Stimulates Renewal

Creating space for innovation is the thread running through the strategy at InAxis. Besides stimulating innovations with an experiment scheme, it is also about stretching the space to treat the culture of legitimacy and efficiency differently. Activities targeting that mental space are given shape in a wide variety of activities. Tone and language play an important part. InAxis cherishes “the bearable lightness of being” wants to be inviting and accessible and launches new concepts to make it possible to discuss the undiscussable. One of these activities is the “Museum of redundant policy.” In April 2006, the minister involved in renewal in the government opens the Museum with an exhibition in the town of Dordrecht. The museum pieces are put forward by citizens, but mainly by the civil servants themselves. After a brief check, the examples of redundant policy are cast in stories and artists use these stories as inspiration for their works of art. The museum responds to the feeling recognized by all civil servants that there are a great many ridiculous and superfluous issues. The museum meets with resistance from several ministries. The minister himself is not amused initially either and threatens to close down InAxis. In a deep discussion, the invitation is presented to have a better look at the activities of InAxis. On further consideration, he believes InAxis is brilliant and meaningful and InAxis is able to continue its work.

The interesting thing about humour is that by definition it generates more than one meaning, thus creating space for a discussion.⁹ Humour makes it possible to make the undiscussable discussable and to cause confusion in fixed concepts. The example shows that if fixed values are flourishing, criticizing them can be a risky business. But it is quite certain that the existing values come under pressure and a discussion can get going about the unchallenged values. This creates the space for renewal. Humour is not manipulable and it is not tangible. Much humour challenges people to look differently at convictions and constructions of reality and it creates space in which convictions can be modified. It is as if the court jester makes all kinds of provoking statements without losing his head for it and thus opens up space for people to think together outside the existing frameworks and standards. No handholds can be given for using humour. It is a question of good timing, coincidences, inspiration, pluck and the setting. The pleasure of humour lies in sharing it. That also makes it an interactive intervention because one thing is for sure: the use of humour evokes a reaction and the undiscussable becomes discussable in that reaction and space is created for looking differently at reality.

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