

Adventure and accelerated learning in high-energy teams

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Abstract

Why is it that we see many of our work colleagues busily running from meeting to meeting, enduring tedious agendas, often afraid to speak because they do not want to appear unsure? Why is it that we see leaders communicating in a style that kills conversation, where they 'tell' others what is happening? Why do we feel the need to appear all knowing...to have the solution to every problem?

Is it because of the way we have been educated and conditioned...needing to know the right answer in the classroom, in exams, in management positions?

In our organisations, we are experiencing constant change and struggling to find the space and approach for people to be part of the change process? When new things are happening, how do we take people with us? How do they become part of the exploration, be given the time and opportunities to think about the possibilities, to inquire rather than to know? How do we create something new together that grows from the curiosities and spirit of those that are part of the change? I believe there's a way.

This paper explores these questions and tells stories about adventure, energy, dialogue and courage, where focussed, high achieving teams use action learning to embrace the new and unknown.

Introduction

'Imagine a workplace where everyone chooses to bring energy, passion and a positive attitude to the job everyday. Imagine an environment in which people are truly connected to their work, colleagues and customers.' (Lundin, Paul and Christensen 2000)

These words are from the back cover of a simple storybook about the Seattle Fish Market. I have used this book many times with teams that I work with because it has simple messages about how to transform a work group into a vibrant and effective team. Simple messages like:

'Choose your attitude' We can choose to bring our best qualities to work.

'Play' We can create our own fun at work, find new energy.

'Make their day'

With our customers, we can make their day.

'Be present'

We can really listen and be there for each other.

Why is it that we often see behaviour so different to this? We start new projects. We scope them, organise a working party, meet, divide up the tasks, tell others what to do, report back, more telling, more reporting back, poor attendance, less understanding, passive resistance, boredom and disengagement. The project hiccups, is abandoned or goes ahead with limited effect. We have all seen this happen.

A project plan can look so simple on paper – all about the task and getting it done. Why does it fall over? Why do we see the same old behaviour?

Experimenting with different ways of bringing people together to accomplish a goal is now my passion. I would like to share a story.

An adventure

There is a program in the local government industry in Australia called the Local Government Management Challenge. It is a friendly competition designed to develop potential leaders. The program acknowledges the diversity, politics and complexities of local government service delivery and is designed to encourage innovation and creativity in responses to community, political and organisational issues. The program focuses on both task and process.

I was one of two mentors coaching a challenge team. We had a group of six volunteers from a variety of service, administrative and planning roles across an organisation of 1000 employees. None of them were managers, all were aged in their twenties and thirties, many meeting each other for the first time. They were required to continue their day-to-day work and manage the challenge within their existing workload, however they needed to commit half a day a week to the challenge preparation period of 6 weeks. The challenge day itself was a full day of competition with other local government teams involving completing a dozen or so tasks within timeframes, many of them running concurrently. Prior to the day, they would be given a pre-challenge task.

It is such a joy to begin with a new group...all who want to be there. They have chosen their attitude; they all want to learn and have fun; they all want to make a difference. They readily shared their passions and excitement and then, interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, they wanted to *start work*. Give us some tasks, let's get our teeth into things...seemed to be the message from the group. So we did. Over the first few weeks of meeting, we had fairly structured sessions.

We asked them to create a recipe for a high performing team. They had to present the result as though on a TV cooking show.

We asked them to build a flagpole out of drinking straws, pipe cleaners, rubber bands etc. It had to have a logo that symbolised the team.

They drafted press releases about local government issues.

They developed criteria for assessing capital works funding proposals.

They did a cost benefit analysis for providing a community bus service.

They designed a risk management framework.

They developed team rules.

They completed many such activities, mixing up local government scenarios with team building tasks. Each activity had a timeframe and a presentation to follow.

Initially, the team wanted us, as mentors, to tell them how they performed after each presentation. Instead, we would ask the same sort of process questions over and over: How do you think you went? What happened? Why? Who took the leadership role? Who picked up the whiteboard marker? How did people feel about that? Did anyone feel that they were not heard? Did anyone want to participate differently? Who felt frustration? Why was that? Who was the timekeeper? Did that work? How would you do the task differently if this was the challenge day? What would give you that extra edge?

Occasionally, we would offer observations about the team dynamics and process as well as the content of the presentations. However, I tended to see us 'telling' them as a failure on our part. I preferred our enquiry to guide their reflection and conversation, prompting suggestions for improvement, encouraging self-awareness and contribution...doing the work for themselves.

We were very much living and breathing the action research cycle so well described by Cherry:

'Action is continually enriched by reflection, planning and the injection of ideas; at the same time, the action produces experience which changes the way we think about things. Successful interventions (ones that work) and meaning (knowledge and learning) are created by the sustained interplay of activity and reflection. During the action cycle, experience is continually recycled, earlier experiences and data are revisited in the light of accumulated data; new action is planned in the light of what went on before, and all experiences are systematically reviewed and evaluated.' (Cherry 1999, p1-2)

More than anything, they learnt to think more 'big picture, not to get caught up in the pedantics too early. They would sort out the approach and key messages first then get into the detail. They were thinking more conceptually, putting things into context and integrating earlier learning.

In the words of Ellinor and Gerard's (1998), the challenge group had begun to see that tasks and structure often take a back seat to the quality of the relationships that are present and the processes or ways they go about getting the work done. Each time we came together, although the activities were different and charged with energy and purpose, the time for reflection and dialogue that came after became more and more treasured and relaxed.

Also during these early weeks, I offered the team the opportunity to undertake a team profile to build further on their self-awareness, understanding of diversity in the team and potential areas for development. We used the Team Management Profile (Margerison and McCann, 1999) and Personal Discovery Workbook (Margerison and McCann, 1997), which explore and assess how each of us prefers to work. The team profile showed that four of the six-team members had a preference for structure, organising and implementing. The usual characteristics were - analytical, results oriented, quick to decide sometimes being impatient and impulsive. The two remaining team members' profile showed that they preferred creativity, research and less structure, enjoying opportunities, new ideas and complexity.

Although the team profile validated the behaviour we experienced at the very first session when the general message was – *let's get on with it* we could see a very different team emerging before our eyes. With the weeks of reflection, building relationships, understanding work preferences and exploring new roles and skills outside their comfort zones, they were not so intent on the task; they were engaged with one another, seeking social interaction.

It was time to give them the pre-challenge task that had been assigned by the State challenge organisers. The team was required to develop a 'Sustainability Agenda' for the municipality.

Without the mentors, they completed this within a week. They developed a model and an action plan and confidently presented it to the executive management team of the organisation. They went on to the State challenge day confident of their trust in each other, determined to have a good time and venture into places they had not been before.

On the day, they completed all 12 tasks assigned to them on time, had loads of fun and succeeded in coming second out of the 23 teams in the State competition.

What an adventure.

Making sense of things

My experience with the challenge team reinforced my belief in the capacity of people to make a difference in organisational change projects. We often see change done poorly. The focus is on the result and how it will be implemented and people are expected to just take it on.

Usually, the implementers are energetic and know what has to be done. However, collaboration is minimal, a communication plan usually non-existent and the people factor does not rate in any risk management planning.

Watching the challenge team organise themselves, make decisions, follow through, look at things from various perspectives helped me think through what we are missing in most organisational change projects. To me, it is often the process leadership that is not present or that falls away.

When I get stuck with my thinking, I often open Ellinor and Gerard (1998). They write about dialogue and how we need to rediscover the transforming art of conversation. Through dialogue, we can find order in the chaos and thereby expand our worldview.

I particularly like to use their self-organising hologram to help me analyse what is happening around me. It is about how organisations lead, manage and organise themselves.

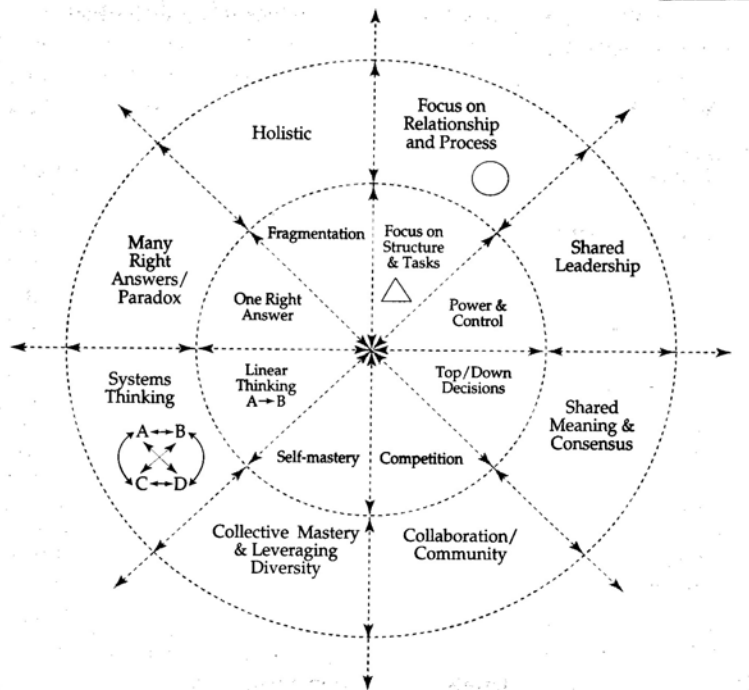


Figure 1 Ellinor And Gerard's Self-Organising Hologram

The inner circle of the hologram in figure 1 represents how organisations have been operating in the past, what they call a Newtonian worldview. There are permeable boundaries separating this view from the current or quantum worldview in the outer circle. The boundaries extend beyond the outer circle presuming that there will be new worldviews in the future. Dialogue helps us to operate more effectively in the outer circle. It also assists us in moving between the old and the new ways.

The hologram helps me identify where I need to be focussed in my work and where my organisation and various groups are operating. It is a model where I see myself riding the boundaries in much of my facilitation work. It is one of my precious tools, something that helps me and others to understand what is happening around us, gives us a sense of organisational life and practice as well as some language to understand what is going on.

I could see the challenge team moving more and more to the outer circle. They were developing systems thinking, collective mastery, collaboration, consensus and shared leadership. They became less fragmented and more whole, not looking for the one right answer, becoming more interested in the questions. I believe that more than anything, the focus on relationship and process makes the difference in team performance and change projects and I attempt to explore this further in the following

sections.

Leaving people behind

In Figure 2 below, I have used the top, right segment of the hologram in Figure 1 which is about the preferred focus on structure and task in the old world view compared with the current world view focussing on relationship and process.

It attempts to show what might happen if the project is all about task and structure when people and process are not considered. With no dialogue, the energy wanes and the project dies or has limited effectiveness.

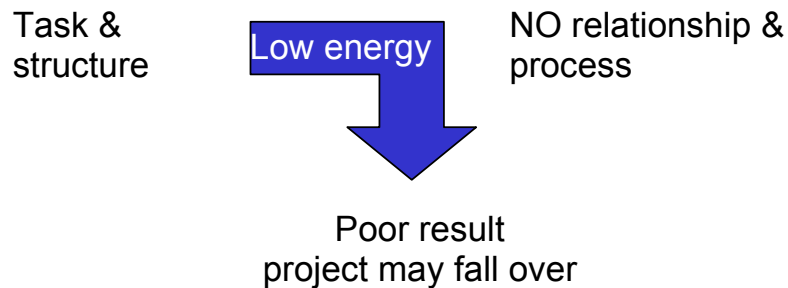


Figure 2 Leaving People Behind...Poor Result

Bringing people along

Figure 3 is about making time for dialogue. When we have time for shared understanding of the project, time for the vision, time for the group values, time for reflection, listening, wondering and nurturing, we find that the project will have a vitality of its own. Energy and spirit build at the boundaries between task and process and the work gets done.

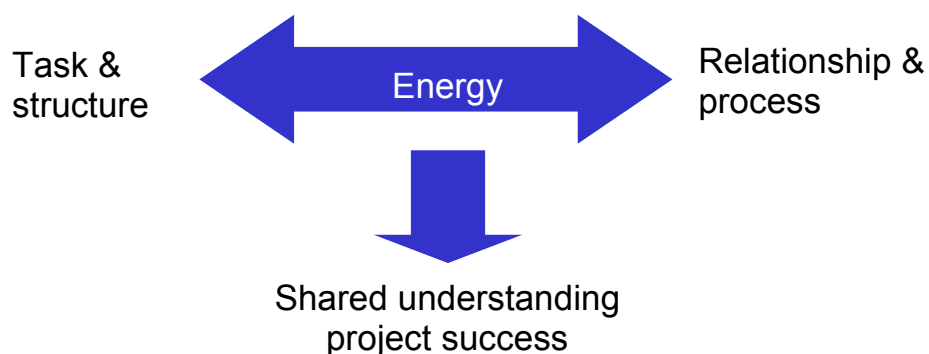


Figure 3 Bringing People Along...Making Time For Dialogue

Playing with time

Working with the challenge team, not only gave me the treasured experiences of reflective practice and its use in improving performance, it also opened new ways of thinking about time in a different way. We had used time in a relaxed way for reflection. However, we used the pressure of timeframes to accelerate learning and results.

In our preparation weeks, there were two types of time constraints happening. There was the deadline of the challenge day itself and the need for the team to be ready for the rigours of the day. I wonder if we would have had the same results without the pressure of time? Some of the participants were attracted to the time-bound nature of the challenge experience. It suited their work preference. They knew that they could commit to something that had a definite goal date in sight. In observing the momentum build over the six-week period, it may have been difficult to sustain that same energy over a longer period of time.

There were also the imposed time limits on each task undertaken. Sometimes this created frustration, other times, exhilaration.

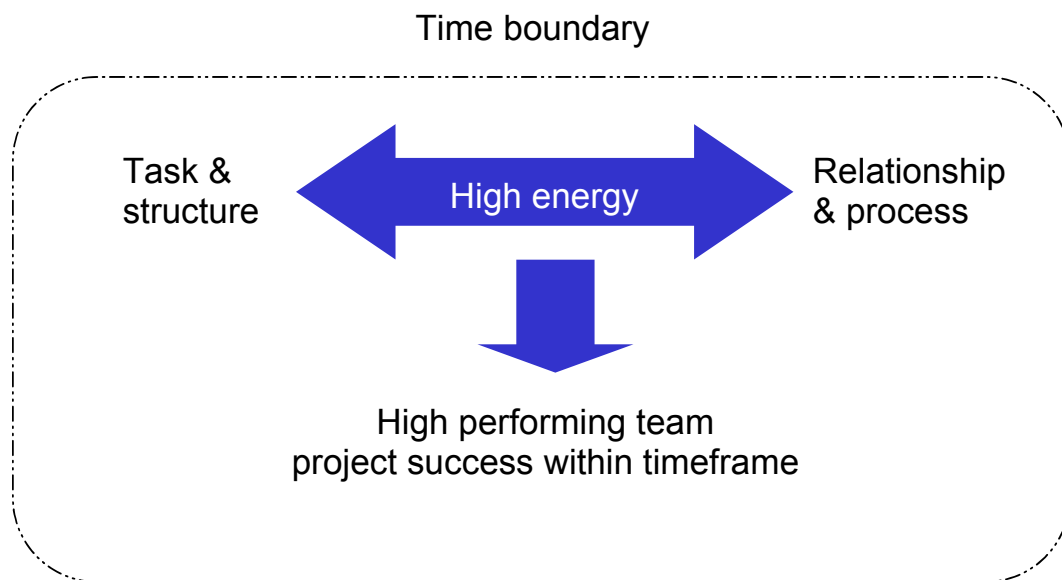


Figure 4 Time Boundary Heightening The Energy

Figure 4 represents my perception of bringing the time-bound activity into the model, forcing even higher energy levels at the boundaries between the task and process. We saw the results – a high performing team, confident in the task and with each other and achieving State recognition.

Taking the challenge approach into new projects

The excitement of being part of such a successful team experience created new conversations. As mentors observing all the competitors on the challenge day, we found ourselves absorbed by the energy and team focus that was happening around us. We were soon exploring different ways that we could use what we called the

'challenge approach' with other work that was on the horizon in the organisation. How could we get critical mass from this approach?

We have since structured two projects in this way. We still struggle with the first few sessions where people just want to *get on with it*, some seemingly impatient with the relationship building activities and searching conversations about shared values and vision. They still ask for structure to kick-start and guide their first tentative steps. And all that is OK.

Chaos

We purposely design activities that invite chaos in. Owen (2000) writes of the interactive organisation that actually enjoys chaos, or at least appreciates it. In a consciously self-organising system where work and play are synonymous, new opportunities and constant learning are hidden in the orderly patterns of disorder. He says that in the dance between chaos and order, something new emerges or is created.

'Everything we know is on a journey from one state to another – out of chaos into order, out of order into chaos.' (Owen 2000, p40)

'No chaos...no difference...no learning...no future' (Owen 1994, p33)

Sometimes when things seem hard, and it is usually with the contextual activities to do with vision, values, purpose, I encourage groups to sit with the mess for a while...see it as work in progress...revisit it next time the group comes together.

What Owen has taught me is that if we allow chaos to be our friend and not something to fear, we can create the spaces for people to think differently, to do differently and to let it go, let it be. Trust the process, trust the self-organising system, trust the people.

And order comes...and structure appears...and learning is evident...and the project moves forward.

Willing to be disturbed

Another type of chaos is our willingness to be disturbed. Margaret Wheatley (2002) calls this a new and strange ally.

I saw the challenge team take this on. They became more willing to have their beliefs, ideas and behaviour challenged by what others thought. They became better listeners and better questioners. They became more curious.

Wheatley's words say it so well:

'We live in a complex world, we often don't know what is going on, and we won't be able to understand its complexity unless we spend more time not knowing.'

'Curiosity is what we need. We don't have to let go of what we believe, but we do need to be curious about what someone else believes.'

'Lately, I have been listening to what surprises me...when I notice what surprises me, I am able to see my own views more clearly, including my beliefs and assumptions.'

'It is not differences that divide us. It's our judgements about each other that do. Curiosity and good listening bring us back together.'

(Wheatley 2002, p34-36)

To finish

What is it that I have taken from these experiences?

I have renewed my endeavours to make time for conversations, even structured debriefs so that people can really connect with one another.

I stop and ask the questions...Is this working? Is this valuable?

I have built more confidence in my not knowing, not having the answer, sitting with the mess for a while.

I have opened my eyes to the power of individuals that spend time together to create something new.

I have confidence to take the challenge approach into new places, new projects.

I have had fun while we worked, not embarrassed to bring some play into every project.

I have seen the team be present for each other.

I have heard their courageous questions as they explore the dynamics of their team.

I have confirmed the value of allowing people to discover the answers for themselves, making their own observations and conclusions.

I have seen them making a difference as they work in their everyday roles, taking the learning and having a go.

I have experienced the loss of their need for me as a mentor as they spread their wings and make things happen on their own.

I have seen a high performing team achieve success that they would never have dreamt of.

I have experienced their energy and spirit.

I have been part of their adventure.

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