

Transitioning tasks in an impossible context through use of drawings:
A Case Example
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The author describes a consulting intervention, only later seen, in light of the TEF theory in this book, as a way of helping a group transition itself from its original impossible task, to a more reasonable and fulfilling one. Unable to find an authorized consulting role during an important meeting, the author began to draw in order to understand the situation as revealed in the discussion around the table. This personal drawing transitioned into a group drawing and ultimately served as a transitional object for them all to re-frame their purpose and goals for a very important roll-out of a new product.

The organization

The organization is an international pharmaceutical corporation, whose headquarters were located in New Jersey, USA.

The roles

The group was convened by the corporate vice president of marketing for the non-US and Western European market, an organization within the larger corporation, whose president sat on the corporate Board. Attending were the heads of the separate regions that were in this system, all of whom reported to its president. These regions were East Europe, Japan, Southeast Asia, Russia and South America. The convenor, along with colleagues in finance, HR, IT and Sales, was part of the staff support group for this region. As the executive coach of the VP, I was asked to help facilitate the process.

The persons

All participants were men. I was the only woman. My client and I are Americans. Two of the Regional presidents were American, but the others had other nationalities.

The task

The task of this day-long meeting, held at corporate headquarters, as conceived by the convenor, was to develop a strategy and action plan for rolling out a new drug, which was already rolled out in the rest of the organization.

The context

Tensions between corporate control and regional autonomy were always a major issue in any such meetings. From the corporate side, it was essential that strategies and plans be coordinated. From the regional side, directors often felt that corporate did not understand the particular issues and compromising influences that they had to cope with.

In addition, the corporate VP was a staff position, and the Regional heads were in Line positions, which gave them more status in the system at large and a direct reporting relationship to the president. I, as an unknown and a female, had even less status than my client. And, despite my effort, I was not able to sufficiently clarify from him exactly what my task was. I had to authorize myself.

How the meeting started:

Despite cordiality and even a bit of effusive hugging on seeing one another again, once the meeting was officially called to order, the tone changed. While my client had carefully planned the agenda and shared it in advance with the participants (my idea), there were almost immediately objections. Other issues were requested to be placed on the agenda. Clarifications of the seemingly obvious were needed. One latecomer finally arrived. Another noted that he must leave early.

For reasons perhaps only known to my unconscious, I found myself at this point needing to orient myself to this disparate group. I was sitting at the table, but at a corner, diagonally opposite from my client. I began to make some doodles on a piece of paper, more to orient myself than to offer anything to the others. At one point I asked for a small point of clarification, which called the attention of the group to what I was doing. Eager, I believe, for any distraction, I was asked to share my drawing.

Propelled by I know not what, I stood and took my drawing to the white board and explained what I had noted. People began making corrections to the drawing and finally, with it so marked up that it was hopeless to follow, I took the initiative of enlarging it on a white board. Everyone waited patiently while I attempted to make a copy. I don't know what my client was thinking, but the group was engaged.

The drawing I was attempting to make was a picture of the group that included pressures mentioned previously, past historical events (a failed roll out), and other dates of major events. As the task began to overwhelm me, one of the

regional directors, noting the need for corrections, took over. We had more than one color, so before you knew it, others were contributing. During the first coffee-break, the discussion was lively and people would return separately and in pairs to review and alter its contents. It seemed to have sparked quite an interest.

The Drawing

In retrospect, I can see now that the drawing that they were contributing to was becoming for the group the new task. Whether intentionally wishing to undermine my client's agenda or truly wanting to clarify (I'm sure the motives were mixed), what began to emerge was a much clearer picture to all of what the issues and conflicts were in relation to the task at hand. One stark example was the bureaucratic impingements facing the Regional head from Japan, who was not authorized in his region in the same way as the others were. In a sense, these Regional heads, in the pursuit (or non-pursuit) of a particular corporate, were actually undertaking a new task, i.e. learning more about one another's role dilemmas and task challenges.

This process was engaging. I loosened up and started asking the right questions. I knew we wouldn't get anywhere rehashing old conflicts, so I kept asking questions relating to role, task, and context for each of them. Ignoring me, they spoke with respect to one another. They seemed to need a "nobody" to guide them.

Meanwhile my client, with whom I had had a long working relationship, began to comment. Gradually it became clear to him that the original task was completely unrealistic and that part of his future role would be to explain that clearly to the corporate powers that be.

The new task emerges:

It wasn't long before it became clear that the concept of a corporate-led roll out strategy and action plan was unrealistic. Not least were the resentments of previous failed efforts. It appeared that each of the regional presidents understood the importance of the roll out and took it as a matter of pride that their part of the organizations should accomplish this as successfully as their more profitable parts. In an ironic sense, this disparate (and often competitive) group seemed to (temporarily at least, or at least in terms of this task) surmount their differences and think together.

The roll out would take place, but each regional president would be authorized, within certain general parameters as outlined by my VP client, to manage his own roll our strategy and time line. Critical to this process would be the support of the VP for various obstacles, many of which were clearly articulated at this meeting and were reflected in the drawing.

The role of my client VP would change from a strategic master to a coordinator of information and, most importantly, a source of resources and support to the different regions. And again, it was his role to be a buffer between this group and his masters, who would be demanding a full report of the meeting.

The source?

Using Susan Long's phrase "framework of connectedness", one could perhaps say that, particularly through the work with the drawing, a certain framework became realized that, at least for the purpose of this task and organizational challenge, led to a successful outcome. As Long puts it: "Often the source must be discovered through a process of enquiry and connection", which somehow took place in this most unlikely context. It is interesting to speculate on how drawing as an activity also mobilized my own source and brought me more in contact with myself, my identity and what I had to offer, all of this taking place unconsciously. At the same time, it was helpful to me in managing my own anxiety in role.

Summary

It was no great strategic moment. It was no great consulting master plan. I was just in this situation, powerless, more or less friendless, but fascinated, as one always is, when one finally sits face to face with roleholders one has only heard described by one's coaching client. Perhaps my fascination became a bit contagious. Perhaps the available colors made a difference. Certainly my client's trust for me was a big help. I think also my being able to accept my low status and my ignorance of the reality lent a kind of modest tone to a meeting of many big egos with great accomplishments behind and in front of them.