

Creating Similarity out of Difference

Our client came to us with a problem which whilst in detail being unique to their environment, in general was a problem facing teams and groups in all sectors.

“How can we be a team when we are different in so many ways? We are geographically spread out, each have our own team to lead and our own priorities. We work independently of one another and don't even know each other particularly well”.

Whilst in fact a Central Services Division, the same brief could have come from any organisation at any level. The team had been newly formed following an organisation-wide restructuring exercise.

Whilst each participant had some knowledge of each other, history had left potential divisions and factions. The group comprised several inverted relationships. Managers who had once been colleagues, subordinates who had once been colleagues. Several had experienced a 'demotion' during the course of the re-organisation. The potential for disruptive behaviour was evident but we chose not to invite reflection on the past process but be ready to discuss difficult issues should they arise.

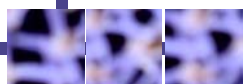
The Process As It Unfolded

When invited to act as facilitators the participants had already agreed to spend a day 'team building'. Our first step was to request a short interview with each of the participants, some by phone and others, where possible, in person. The aim of the interview was initially to invite their involvement in shaping the agenda for the day. What were the priorities for the day? What would make a good use of their time together? We also wanted to find out about their best experience of spending time away from the office had been. This was partially to inform the most appropriate style for the day but also to create a positive anticipation of the day from their own experience. The interview was also used to check on any boundaries or issues that we should be aware of. Importantly the interview provided an opportunity for each person to be heard individually. Last but not least the opportunity for us to make a personal connection with each person before the day itself.

The agenda formed a series of expanding circles moving outward across the organisation, customers and shareholders. The first circle centred on an appreciation of the *individual* personalities within the team. This allowed each participant to be valued for themselves before being asked to think of themselves as part of something larger. Recognising and valuing the differences and similarities at the level of the person provided the foundations on which to build subsequent understandings of the relationship between the parts and the whole.



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The next step was to ask each participant to consider their role in respect of its purpose, meaning and values. This deeper exploration of what each person does, underlined the links between who they are and what they and their reports do. Here the participants began to consider themselves in relation to the work that they do.

Sometimes there is a great congruency between a person's role and themselves but it is also an opportunity for great personal learning about how we go about our role.

In addition each participant considered themselves in relation to a wider group, in this case their own functional team. As this was 'their territory' the level of risk from other participants was low which allowed the association space to take hold.

Participants presented their purpose, meaning and values to the rest of the group allowing time for exploration and feedback. Presentations included graphic representations, bullet points and statements. Participants were encouraged to say what they were curious about and what they valued most.

Having had the opportunity to question and understand each individuals offer, the group were asked to try and draw parallels between the presentations. They looked for any common themes that existed between them and one by one present the linkages they saw. As each subsequent set of linkages were presented participants were asked to group together any recurring themes that emerged from their individual presentations. These 'meta themes' became the shared characteristics and values of the group which identified what held them together and what gave them collective strength.

These were also significant because they were built together and not the property of any one individual in the group. This common ownership became a point of connection between the participants and the beginning of a shared identity.

From the meta themes the group felt as if they had taken a real step forward and had exceeded their expectations from the start of the process. They were in a position to create *and make real* a strong proposition to their colleagues.



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The Theory Underlying The Design

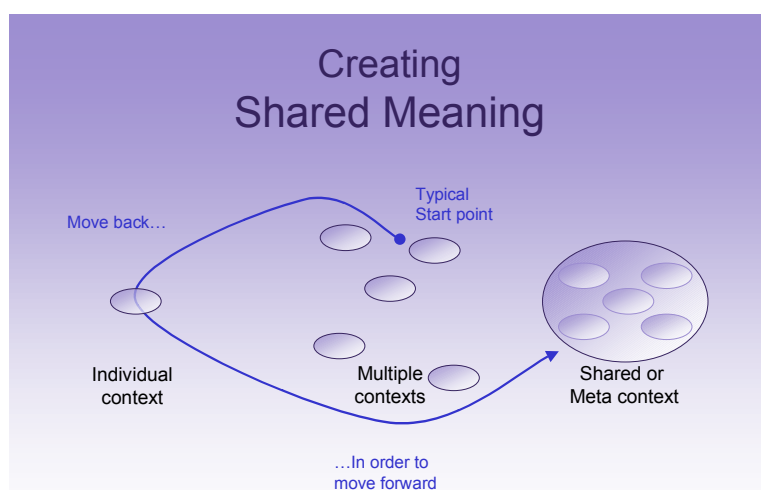
This piece of work is part of a larger Organisation Development process aimed at creating a stronger identity for the organisation and a greater sense of inclusion. At its heart lies the valuing of individuals before asking people to create or commit to group identity. It is an open ended process in as much as the outcome of the groups' activity is not prescribed therefore allowing room for creativity and growth.

A natural human tendency is to break things up into their component parts and discriminate between them. A contrary but equally natural human tendency is to group together those things that share characteristics.

Another natural tendency when presented with a diverse group is to move them toward a shared view. The result is often non compliance or agreement in words only. By stepping back rather than forward we allow individuals to be valued for themselves before committing to shared action.

By starting with individual's personalities and working out to the group and the organisation we allowed the expression of difference to become the foundations for what held the group together. Allowing this paradoxical relationship between difference and similarity to emerge is a key aspect of the group's development..

At each stage in the process an emphasis is given to appreciating the values brought by individuals rather than focusing on the problems associated with any particular type or person. By focusing on the positive aspects we created an opportunity for a virtuous cycle to begin rather than the potentially negative vicious cycle.



The creation of meta concepts from individually held ideas values and beliefs is not a linear process as we might expect. In order to move forward we need first to move back to a point where individuals feel recognised for their value and then choose to be involved in creating a shared value.

