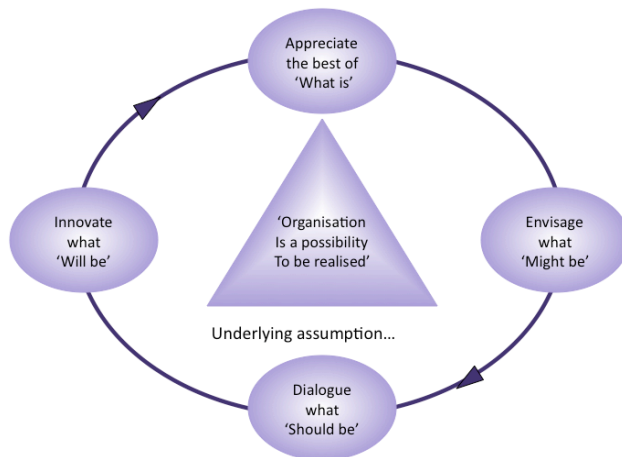


Strengthening Links

Our client, the Supply Chain Team for an international paint manufacturer, had been in existence for a little over a year when they asked us to come and help them with some internal frictions that were beginning to show. Relationships between several of the team were long standing and very strong, particularly between the heads of production and the Unit Director. They formed the 'old team' that existed before the supply chain concept widened the membership of the team. Other members especially at the far ends of the supply chain felt less included and understood. Each person was head of their own link in the chain and because of geographic and functional differences would often get together only when meetings were called. Workflows and improvement initiatives were interrupted and frustrated by misunderstandings, different priorities and personality clashes.

Before calling the team together for a day and a half we began by finding out what was 'best' about the team rather than the more obvious what doesn't work. Asking deficit questions such as 'what doesn't work' begins a chain reaction of negative thought that usually leads to blame, defensiveness and the reinforcement of long held prejudices. Not a backdrop conducive to fostering better relationships and improving performance!



Each of the members were interviewed using an 'Appreciative' approach that explored, in addition to what already worked, but specifically:

1. What people most valued about themselves and each other?
2. What core factors gave life to the team when it was at it's most effective?
3. What they were being asked to become?
4. If they had 3 wishes for the team what would they be?
5. What they would most like to work on during the coming 24 hours?

Team members talked at length in response to these openly positive questions. Questions 1 and 2 evoked a wealth of fantastic stories, qualities and passions that were deeply held and a real openness that set the scene for the workshop. Questions 3 and 4 allowed people to describe how they saw the future, to voice doubts they had about the role the team was being asked to perform and any concerns they had about the way they worked together. Again, responses were open, honest and heartfelt. The final question asked them where their energy lay regarding the forthcoming workshop; what issues were burning, what outcomes they would like to achieve. These began to shape the format of the day but it was important that the team shape the agenda collectively, which was the purpose of our first session.

We met towards the end of a working day when members of the team were in the same location following a business meeting. After a framing of the day the team members were given anonymised summaries of the responses to the questions and asked to spend some time reading what they had collectively said. They were asked to write what they thought was interesting or significant onto 'Post-it' notes in 3 words or less for each note. Each person was invited to share and summarise what he or she had written and place the notes onto a large board. As each person summarised their thoughts they were asked to group their notes alongside any they thought represented similar issues. Once all members had shared their responses to the interviews they were invited to gather round the board and collectively agree what the main items should be for the following day.

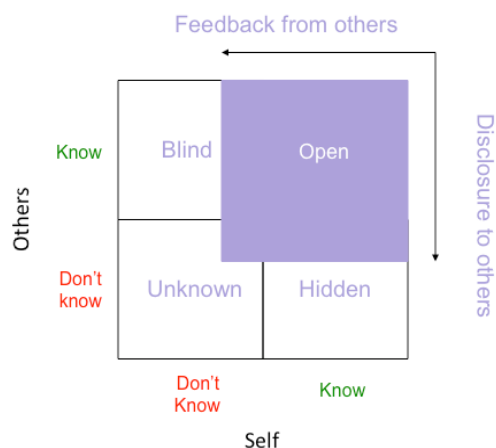


This last 'collective' part of the session was planned to take about 20 minutes and in fact lasted for little over an hour but was fantastically valuable in engaging people with what they were passionate about and afforded us the opportunity to see how the team behaved together which we were able to offer as feedback as a reflection the following day.

Day 2 began with a round of 'checking in' where people were asked to reflect on the previous afternoon's session and any subsequent conversations that had taken place during the evening. This was just as impassioned and full a discussion as the previous day's had been. We offered our observations from day one; that several members appeared passive in the discussion whilst others tended to dominate. We asked if that pattern was familiar and what impact it might have on the quality of discussions. We didn't have to labour the point!

Relationships between team members are critical to the effectiveness of the team as a whole and one of the themes that had emerged was to do with how people viewed each other and how that might impact their working relationships.

We devised a process by which each person chose and recorded a number of questions about themselves that they would like to ask individuals within the team. We were not prescriptive about the questions but prompted them with the Johari Window, to think about what they didn't know about themselves but other people did. Questions such as 'what do you think my main contributions to meetings are?'; 'how do I come across to you as a colleague?'; and 'what can I do in order to help you achieve your goals?' We then organised a rota of 6 x 40 minute conversations where each person gave and received feedback from everyone else. A working lunch and coffee breaks were built into the process that took the morning and an hour into the afternoon.



Facilitating the process and keeping to time was no small feat as the conversations were deep, engaging and full of value for the individuals. By early afternoon everybody had engaged in half a dozen fantastically powerful conversations that had deepened the relationships between the team members considerably.

After a brief break during which we discussed our thoughts with the Director, we organised a form of 'Open Space' to allow people to address any remaining issues that they felt needed more airtime. This essentially allowed the group to work where the energy was by individuals negotiating parallel timeslots to work on a particular issue that is important for them. Other members choose which slots are of interest and join that group.

The governing 'Law of two feet' means that participants only stay with a group if they are learning from and / or contributing to it. If not, they vote with their two feet and move to another group. Participants were given both the right and responsibility to maximise their own learning. Bounded by this law, the Open Space session generated accountability among the participants and was an act of trust on the part of the Director who agreed to let the team take the lead in deciding actions for themselves. These sessions by their nature produced a host of action points that had been collectively agreed. These were collated and discussed jointly by the whole group at the end of the afternoon.

Following the workshop, those people who previously felt marginalised became central to the team's purpose without displacing long-standing relationships. They felt connected to but not constrained by each other. The Supply Chain group streamlined its meeting process to ensure they only met to discuss things that were important to the whole supply chain. Where only certain interests were being discussed, informal meetings and teleconferences were arranged to suit. The connecting links between the Supply Chain Team members were deepened and strengthened through the simple skills of inquiry, feedback and disclosure.