



One view or many?

What colour is the sky where you come from?

Implying that someone is from another planet is a fairly common method for maintaining the status quo. It puts people in their place and is an effective weapon in the struggle for power in organisations.

That struggle is over what is *real*, who speaks the truth. Implicit in the struggle is that only one version of reality is valid. The notion of a single, objective reality is so widely accepted that to offer a different view is seen as heresy. The thrust of this piece is to consider the heretical and not to dismiss it out of hand.

“Consider the heretical”

Much recent management wisdom encourages diversity, creativity, multiple perspectives and empathy. But it is hard to shake off the belief that what we experience is not *the* real world. Unless we can let go of this latter notion, we cannot fully consider other people’s points of view. We tend to classify things as either ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ and for someone else’s view to be right, ours must be wrong - which is a difficult thing to admit even to ourselves. This polarisation marks the fertile middle ground ‘off limits’. In fact we are so accustomed to judgements that often we don’t realise we are making them.

So empowerment, diversity and creativity struggle because, when all is said and done, we’re often too heavily invested in our own view of the world. The result of this ‘Catch 22’ is that organisations get very little return on investment for initiatives that are set up to fail.

The alternative perspective argues that reality is much more subjective and complex than we imagined. It argues that we create our own experiences with those around us in the minutiae of things we say and decisions we take. Our approach and intention shape the future we experience.

For example, consider giving a talk to a diverse group of influential people. The words and images you use are objectively the same for everyone but the meaning they make from those words is unique to each individual. Their history, experience, culture, prejudices, and personal

agenda all act to colour the meaning they make from what you say.

“Communication is more about what is heard than what is said.”

Everyone’s experience of your talk is different and for him or her that experience *is* reality. It forms the basis of how they think, how they respond, how they communicate with others and how the future will play itself out. Communication is more about what is heard than what is said.

The words and images we use to communicate are actually doing much more than conveying ideas from one place to another. They are in fact creating reality in conjunction with other people’s own words and images.

This is an incredibly powerful realisation for people who are interested in creating and sustaining change in organisations. We cease to think of communication as linear but as cyclical and iterative. Conversations become the fabric of change and the cloth they weave is diverse, complex, rich and self-referential.

“We cannot choose not to participate but we can choose how...”

We influence the conversations by our own participation and facilitation. We cannot choose not to participate but we can choose how we participate. Because we can choose, we are also accountable for our part in creating the future we experience. The questions we ask and the responses we give are, in some way, fateful, they turn people on or off, they change the course of the future.

So the next time you are asked what colour the sky is where you come from, tell them. Tell them in rich and vibrant detail because it’s every bit as valid as their sky. But remember to ask what colour they see in return, be curious about it and remember it’s every bit as valid as yours...