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Learning from Collective Experience

A Different View of Organizational Learning

By Gervase R. Bushe

Organization Development has always been about helping groups, large and small, learn from their collective experience. To most people this means a group having a discussion about something that happened in the past, analyzing it and agreeing on what to do the same and differently in the future. This approach sounds like it should be a pretty straight forward thing to do; but as those of us who’ve been in the business a long time know, it often doesn’t lead to much learning or change at all. As I’ve tried to understand this, especially in the context of how to create and sustain collaborative relationships in organizations, I’ve come to realize that there is a fatal flaw in that popular image of a group of people learning by reflecting on their experience. The flaw is this—everyone creates their own experience, everyone is having a different experience, and everyone is making up stories about each other’s experience.

I’m addressing this article primarily to OD practitioners who, like me, have come to assume the truth of that last sentence. In this paper I’m going to start from this set of assumptions and describe a model and method I’ve developed to help people and groups learn from their collective experience. As will become clear, I’m operating in much the same territory as Argyris, Schon and Senge, but have developed a different approach to creating organizational learning. I begin by identifying the problems in how people normally experience and make sense of each other that creates the need for organizational learning and then I go on to define organizational

learning as follows: an inquiry into our patterns of organizing that leads to a positive change in those patterns. Then I describe a method I’ve developed, the “organizational learning conversation,” that I believe creates genuine organizational learning, one conversation at a time.

A Model of Experience

If everyone creates their own experience, and everyone is having a different experience, then collectively learning from experience is a lot more complicated than it first appears. I’ve noticed that when people try to talk about what happened last week in order to learn from it, the first thing that happens is a subtle contest over who had the “right” experience. What actually happened? What’s the right way to think about it? In any group trying to work in a collaborative fashion, this turns out to be an unhelpful conversation that can even lead to a decrease in collaboration.

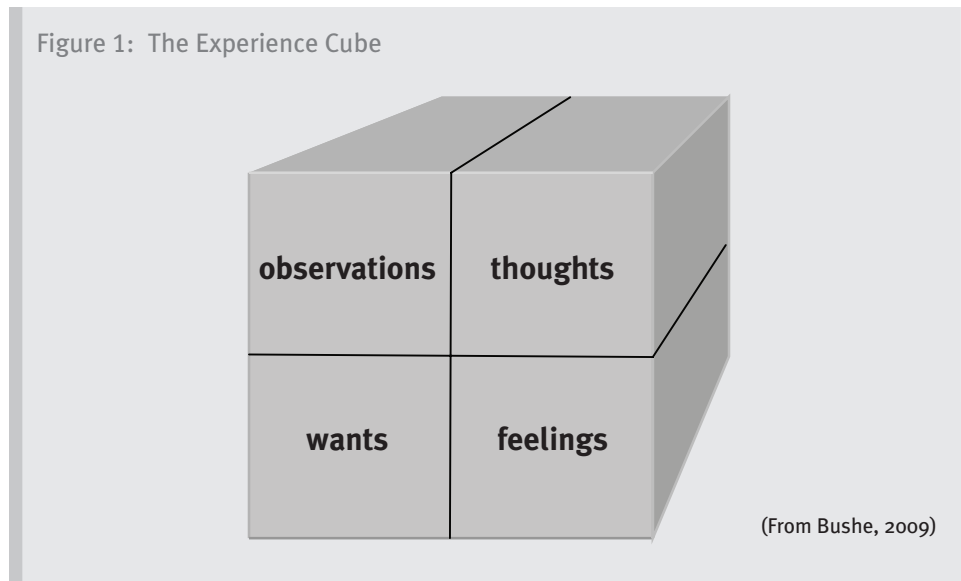
If you think of collaboration as I do, as a relationship in which each person feels equally responsible for the success of their joint project or process, you can see why attempts to define who has the “right experience” reduce collaboration. If I end up being pressured or argued into abandoning my views and accepting your experience as the right one, I’m definitely going to feel less responsible for ensuing decisions. And if it’s the boss who is having the “right experience,” the easiest thing in the world to do is to make the boss responsible for the success of whatever

ensues. Collaboration in the sense of feeling personally responsible and committed goes out the window.

If we are going to learn from experience, we first need to get a lot more clarity about what experience is. The Experience Cube (Bushe, 2009) is a model of experience that proposes:

1. Experience only happens to a person here and now. People have memories of past experiences—but these are mental constructions that change and not actual experience (even though we often use the word to mean what happened to us in the past). Because of the nature of mental maps and sense-making processes (discussed below), the only way to learn from experience is to discuss it right here and right now or very soon thereafter.
2. Experience is composed of 4 elements: observations, thoughts, feelings and wants. **Observations** are what a video recorder would pick up. **Thoughts** are all mental constructs. **Feelings** are sensations and emotions. **Wants** are motives, aspirations, objectives and desires.
3. At every moment, a person is having all four elements of experience, but most people have not developed the awareness to recognize the entirety of their four-part experience. Some experience is near the surface of awareness and some is deep in the shadows. Everyone has different levels of awareness of the four elements of their experience, and everyone accesses different elements of their experience at different speeds.

From the point of view of this model, the key to self-awareness for leadership and consulting effectiveness is the ability to become aware of your moment-to-moment experience (observations, thoughts, feelings and wants). The only element of experience that has any objective validity is observations. All the rest are subjective and, therefore, have no claim to any validity beyond subjective validity. In order to learn from experience, people have to recognize that "my truth" is not "the truth"; that what I think, feel and want is only valid for me and that everyone else will naturally be hav-



ing different thoughts, feelings and wants. Learning from collective experience is not about getting people to have the same experience; it actually begins with understanding and acknowledging the variety of experiences taking place among the people involved.

We are Sense-Making Beings

As I mentioned in the introduction, the third thing that limits the usefulness of conventional attempts to collectively reflect on experience is our tendency to make up stories about each others' experience. As sense-making beings, people are compelled to make sense of others who are important to them. They do this by filling in the gaps of what they know about the other person's experience. If I know what you think but not what you feel or want, I make up a story about that to fill in the gaps. In order for my story to make sense, it has to fit with what I already believe to be true about you (my past acts of sense-making). Two things about this process tend to destroy collaboration and create a need for organizational learning. 1) People tend not to check out their stories with the person about whom they make them up. This is particularly true when they are having a bad experience of the other person. If a person is confused or upset about another's actions, they will seek out third parties with whom to make sense of the interaction. Having another person agree with one's story makes it seem more like an objective truth—and that "truth" will continue to influence further acts of sense-making. 2)

The stories people make up about others tend to be worse than the reality (what the other person is really thinking, feeling and wanting). There are many reasons why this is so, as follows: the impulse to be cautious in the face of uncertainty, organizations that have built up layers of cynicism, a tendency to personalize what actually has nothing to do with oneself, projecting negative self-traits onto others, and the general bias toward seeing the worst, which David Cooperrider calls a "deficit" mindset—are just some of the possible reasons.

Therefore, both the nature of experience and the process of sense-making can lead to a situation where everyone is having a different experience, everyone is making up stories about each other's experience, the stories get worse and worse and, over time, a toxic environment of gossip and distrust settles in. In the clinical research that I and my students have done for the past 15 years, we estimate that 4 out of 5 "conflicts" between people at work are a result of this process: people have made up inaccurate stories to make sense of others, and over time these stories have led to a total breakdown of collaboration. This is why we need organizational learning so urgently.

Organizational Learning

The phrase organizational learning has come to have a variety of meanings—from garden variety training to sophisticated models of collective sentience. As a concept, there isn't one "right" way to define it—rather one has to ask which way of

defining this concept is most useful, provides avenues for effective action or leads to new and better insights. I believe that for the phrase to be useful it has to refer to something beyond simple individual learning inside an organization.

To clarify organizational learning, we need to be precise about what is an organization. An organization is not its tasks or goals; an organization has tasks and goals. An organization is not its people; an organization has people that come and go. An organization is not its products, markets, or technologies. Rather, an organization is found in its processes of organizing—in the repetitious patterns of how people relate to each other while they work to gather and interpret information, solve problems, make decisions, manage conflict, and implement change in their efforts to accomplish the organization's purpose.

I believe that organizational learning takes place within the relationships that make up the organization. From this point of view, learning is a social, not an individual, phenomenon. I define learning as the outcome of an inquiry that produces knowledge and leads to change. Organizational learning happens when two or more people inquire into their patterns of organizing (how they work together) and produce knowledge that leads to a positive change in their patterns of interaction. It is the change in patterned relations that makes learning organizational and not simply individual. The patterns of organizing are “how things really get done around here.” All the ways in which people usually interact while doing the business of the organization are what I mean by “patterns of organizing” or “patterns of interaction.” Unless these patterns change, the organization doesn't really change. When people go through a major restructuring and then say “nothing really changed,” what they mean is that the patterns of interaction didn't change.

Organizational Learning Conversations

My approach to organizational learning provides a method for having conversations about unproductive and dissatisfy-

ing patterns of interaction that leads to new knowledge and a positive change in the pattern - one that increases people's willingness to collaborate. Since so many of the problems or conflicts between people and groups that destroy collaboration are actually a product of their different experiences and sense-making, just trying to understand their own and each other's experience often makes the conflict go away. What follows is a concrete example of an organizational learning conversation.

I was running a week-long training program for 35 managers to teach them the skills of organizational learning while working on real organizational issues. There was a staff of six trainers. Because of the flexibility of this course, the staff met frequently to discuss what was happening and what to do next. On the evening of the third night, one of the staff, Bruce, voiced his desire to spend most of next day working with the small group he was leading. The rest of the staff thought that other, large-group activities were more appropriate. At this point I noticed Bruce did not participate much as we developed a plan for the next day. On the next morning, I announced the day's schedule to the assembled participants. From the back of the room, Bruce called out, “What? What's the plan?” I reiterated it. He said, “That's the plan?! When did that plan get decided?” I was starting to feel a little annoyed but tried not to show it as I said, “Last night at dinner.” At this point he turned away, walked toward the back of the room, and muttered loudly, “Hmmm—I wonder where I was when that plan was decided.”

Later that day the entire group of 35 managers was involved in a very tense and emotional discussion as people were finally telling the truth of their experience about some recent changes that had taken place in the organization. I was leading this segment of the workshop and had some clear goals about where interpersonal clarity needed to be increased. At one point a manager, Heather, voiced some issues that were important to her but that I considered tangential to the larger purpose of the session. She had finished talking and another person was about to speak when

Bruce stepped in and said, “I want to hear more from Heather.” At that point I said, “I think what Heather has to say is important, but I'm concerned that we only have so much time and it is not focused on the issue we are dealing with here.” Bruce said, “Yeah, well I still want to hear more from Heather.” I looked at him pointedly, raised my voice, and said “NO.” Bruce looked startled, turned on his heel, and walked back to his seat.

This response was a very ineffective way to deal with Bruce, and it was obvious to everyone in the room that Bruce and I had a “conflict.” But the issue was ignored as we continued with the meeting. A few hours later Bruce and I met, to have a learning conversation about it. By this point I had gotten myself worked up at Bruce's “acting out” because he hadn't gotten his way. I thought his behavior that morning had been completely uncalled for and was feeling pretty self-righteous, especially because, in my mind, Bruce is more rigid about not letting others interfere in a session he is leading than I am. Here is how the conversation went.

Bruce: I need to talk about what happened this afternoon. I have to tell you that I did not like how you talked to me and I'm still angry about it.

Gervase: Yeah, well, I didn't like how I acted either, but obviously I was angry and that came out.

Bruce: Yeah, I've been wondering if something started going on before that incident.

Gervase: Of course! After what you did this morning, I was pretty upset.

Bruce: This morning? What did I do this morning?

I described the story I had made up about his behavior first thing in the morning. In my mind, he was still wanting to spend time in his small group and resisting the design the rest of us had agreed on. When he turned and muttered the way he had, I thought that he was complaining that his views had not been considered. I did not like him acting this way in front of the participants after the decisions had been made.

Bruce listened calmly to all of this and asked some questions to get clear about my experience. As I talked more about it, I realized that I had started getting upset with him the night before. My story, of which I hadn't been fully aware, was that he stopped participating in the design conversation because he hadn't gotten his way. By the morning I was already seeing him as petulant, and that affected how I experienced his behavior in the group. Then I had thought that he was attacking my leadership. So by the time the incident occurred in the afternoon, I was primed to experience Bruce's actions as attacks on my authority. My outburst was as much in response to thinking that he was being very inappropriate in managing his petulance as from feeling attacked.

Bruce asked me questions until both he and I thought that he was clear about what I had observed, thought, felt, and wanted; and then he told me his experience. He had not been aware that he was not participating the night before, but now realized that he had been preoccupied by some bad news he had received when he'd called home before dinner. He did not care that we did not meet in the small groups—it had been his preference but not a strong preference. That morning he really had not remembered the design conversation from the night before, and his loud mutter as he turned his back was intended to mock himself, not me. At that moment he had felt guilty about not having been tuned in to the design for the day and was mentally attacking himself, not me, for having zoned out. So, completely unaware of the experience I was having, he was pretty shocked when I said “NO” that afternoon.

After we got completely clear about each other's experience, Bruce said that he sometimes has this effect on people—they feel he is challenging their leadership. He isn't conscious of wanting to challenge their leadership and wants to learn more about how he creates that impression in others. Bruce owned that he had a part in this pattern that is still outside his awareness and he is learning more about it. I owned that the problem started for me during the planning meeting at dinner but that I wasn't paying attention to it and it got

out of hand. I realized that I should have checked the story I was making up about Bruce withdrawing because he didn't get his way instead of letting it fester just on the edge of my awareness (something I do too often). I also owned that when I don't get my way I sometimes withdraw and act petulant, and that I had projected this onto Bruce.

I asked Bruce how he felt about my leadership and he assured me that he was perfectly satisfied with the way I was running the workshop. He asked me how I felt about his participation; and I assured him that, except for that meeting, I was very pleased with his contributions. Bruce and I reaffirmed our deep regard and respect for each other. We later talked to the rest of the staff and the workshop participants about what we had learned.

That learning conversation lasted about 20 minutes. As you can see, once I began describing my experience I got clearer about my experience of Bruce. When we talked about things that had happened in the past, they were to help each other understand what each of us was observing, thinking, feeling and wanting right then, during our conversation. When he understood my experience, he was able to describe his own experience and show me where my sense making was way off. Once we got clear about each other's experience, the “conflict” went away.

Like so many organizational problems, the real issue was that he and I were operating from completely different perceptions and that I had an inaccurate story about him. Notice that we spent no time discussing whether Heather should have been given more air time. Sometimes people frame organizational learning as understanding and analyzing different theories-of-action. Should Heather's issue have been brought forward? What was the most appropriate intervention at that point? That might have been an interesting conversation to have had, but would have been irrelevant to understanding the underlying conflict that was developing between Bruce and me. If we had simply focused on Heather and gotten into a debate about what was right, probably nothing use-

ful would have resulted. Yet how many attempts to resolve conflict at work focus on figuring out the “right way” to do things and thus lead to little or no change?

In an organizational learning conversation, each person works to a) understand their own experience, b) describe their experience to the other, and c) fully understand the other person's experience. This happens in a scripted, ritualized fashion where each person takes a turn having their experience explored and understood without anyone trying to change it or fix it. Again our research shows that 4 out of 5 times, simply doing this changes the problem pattern and increases collaboration.

Two things seem to be critical to making this work. One is the right attitude: the purpose of the conversation is for each person to learn more about their own and the other's experience, not to try and change them. The second is a simple technique: one person's experience is fully explored and understood, using the experience cube as a guide, before the other person responds to anything they have heard. This means a person needs to be able to fully summarize and describe what the other person observed, thought, felt, and wanted before they start talking about their own, different experience. It usually requires some coaching to stop people when they are getting reactive and to ask them to keep listening and summarizing. What normally happens is when person B hears person A's inaccurate perceptions they want to stop A and clear up the inaccuracy before they have learned anything more about A's perceptions. This seems to stop learning dead in its tracks.

There is a third thing that is critical when the people having the conversation haven't had many learning conversations with each other or there is a lot of tension in the relationship. Between each transition (when each person shifts from either describing their experience to listening to the other's experience) each person should do a lap around the experience cube, describing their experience in the moment. So, as person A finishes describing her experience of the issues, and person B has adequately summarized it, person A describes what she is observ-

ing, thinking, feeling, and wanting in that moment. Then person B describes what he is observing, thinking, feeling, and wanting in that moment. Then Person B proceeds to describe his experience of the issues and his response to what he has just heard from A. Checking each person's in the moment experience between each transition helps to reduce the inaccurate sense-making that is going on in the midst of the conversation and can sometimes be the most important part of the conversation, especially if the very pattern that is causing problems for the two people shows up in the conversation itself.

There are skills and perspectives I haven't discussed here that help people

consistently have successful learning conversations (Bushe, 2009), but most people can have these conversations if facilitated by someone competent in helping people increase their awareness of their in the moment experience. In this way organizational learning can happen one conversation at a time, rippling out through the system as people help themselves and each other get clear about what their collective experience actually is. Ultimately, they discover that people don't have to have the same experience in order for them to work collaboratively, and what sustains collaboration in the long run is allowing the diversity of experience to surface and be acknowledged.

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