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CHAPTER EIGHT

SENSE MAKING AND THE PROBLEMS OF LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Barriers and Requirements for Creating Cultures of Collaboration

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This ideas in this chapter come from thirty years of working with and studying business organizations, attempting to foster greater collaboration and the difficulties they encountered. In many chapters in this book, we see that collaboration is a complicated relationship that requires ongoing maintenance to sustain itself. When we talk about building *cultures* of collaboration, we are interested in creating environments that will sustain those kinds of relationships over the long term. It's not enough that collaboration occurs episodically in facilitated gatherings; it needs to be part of the day-to-day experiences of people for it to be part of the culture.

Cultures of Collaboration Are Hard to Create

This chapter rests on the premise that a culture of collaboration is one where certain basic assumptions are shared (Schein, 1992), including those that are required for the maintenance of collaborative relationships. I'll begin with a story about a work group that wants to be collaborative and whose manager describes it as collaborative but that over time has not been able to implement the maintenance processes required for real collaboration to take hold.

Lynette's Story

This story takes place in a business unit whose manager prides himself on teamwork and collaboration. In the unit's weekly meeting, Lynette, a new manager of the customer service group, describes her group's poor performance results and what she intends to do to improve them. As she talks, other managers listen politely, and a few ask questions "for clarification." At the end of her presentation, the boss thanks her, encourages the rest to pitch in with solving the problems, and says he looks forward to reviewing the results of her plans next quarter, and the meeting moves on. But many things have not been said. More than one manager at the meeting does not really agree with Lynette's analysis of the problems but says nothing about it. Some say nothing to avoid embarrassing Lynette, others to avoid being seen as quarrelsome. Doug wonders if Lynette is competent and if she really understands the situation. Marlene believes Lynette knows perfectly well what is going on but has chosen not to talk about the whole story to protect people in her department. Bruce thinks Lynette is trying to protect herself by covering up the real problems in her group. Sondra thinks Lynette is well intentioned but taken advantage of by her employees. Others have other thoughts and opinions, all of which they keep to themselves.

After the meeting, some of them get together in smaller gatherings, over coffee or lunch, and conversation turns to what they think is really going on in Lynette's department, what Lynette is really going to do about it, and why she is saying some things about it but not others. Differing opinions are examined and discussed, and in future interactions with Lynette, people look for tips and clues to support or refute different opinions about her real thoughts and feelings. In time, these managers come to develop firm opinions about Lynette's real motivations and competence. None of this is ever discussed or checked out with Lynette. Over the next few months, an image of who Lynette is, her strengths and weaknesses, her motivations and agenda, develop among each of the smaller groups, and these guide future interactions with Lynette.

Lynette is fully aware of what is going on in her department and has some excellent ideas about what to do about it. Due to perceptions she had developed of her current boss before becoming his subordinate, however, she believes it is not a good idea to be completely truthful, especially since some of his behaviors are part of the problem. She is a little surprised by the lack of cooperation she is receiving from her peers. They're nice and verbally supportive, but she notices a lack of follow-through on things she thought they

had agreed to. She attributes this to overwork, lack of resources, and forgetfulness, unaware that the others are actually concerned about the accuracy of her analysis of the problems and the motivations behind her plans. Why waste energy and resources on a doomed effort is the thinking behind much of the noncooperation.

After months of frustration with the slow pace at which others are moving, Lynette, at another meeting, brings up her need for more support from others to improve performance. A certain nervous tension fills the room, and her boss, a “team player,” moves quickly to smooth things over. Lynette’s complaint is not examined in much detail, and everyone professes a willingness to be more supportive. Although Lynette’s coworker are well intentioned, their behaviors, and the beliefs behind them, don’t really change. A cycle of lunchtime conversations, unexamined assumptions, and avoidance of issues results in continued mediocre results and increasing stress from all the gossip and politics at work.

Interpersonal Mush Versus Interpersonal Clarity

If this sounds at all familiar to you, then you understand the territory of this chapter. I believe that in this story lies the basis of group and organizational dysfunction and the inability of smart and well-intentioned people to create the collaborative work cultures they say they want. I describe this group as living in *interpersonal mush*. Interpersonal mush occurs when people’s understanding of one another is based on fantasies and stories they have made up, thinking that they are facts. I will argue that over time, interpersonal mush diminishes the capacity for collaboration. I will describe how *interpersonal clarity*, the antidote to interpersonal mush, is the basis for sustaining long-term collaboration. By *collaboration*, I mean a relationship in which two or more people are committed to the success of whatever project or process they are jointly engaged in and use assumptions and behaviors consistent with interdependence while pursuing those outcomes.

The model I will describe echoes a stream of thinking about organizational learning (Argyris and Schön, 1974, 1996; Schutz, 1994; Senge, 1990; Short, 1991; Torbert, 1973, 1981) that emphasizes the need for trust and authenticity in maintaining effective working relationships. It blends social constructionism, cognitive psychology, and family systems therapy to offer a perspective on why so little authenticity is found in normal working relationships and a novel, practical solution for increasing clarity and promoting group

and organizational learning. I will begin by describing two aspects of normal cognitive functioning that I think create interpersonal mush and diminish the capacity for collaboration: the nature of experience and the nature of sense making. I will then describe why sustainable collaboration requires interpersonal clarity, what makes it difficult to achieve, and a process for increasing it. I'll conclude by offering thirteen "shared assumptions" whose presence in a culture support interpersonal clarity. I will mainly talk about this in the context of work organizations, although I think it applies to all systems of collective action.

We Create Our Own Experience

We have at least two very different ways of using the word *experience* in the English language. One refers to things that happened to us in the past, things we put on our résumés. The other refers to the moment-to-moment stream of perceptions, emotions, desires, and observations going through us. In this article, I will be using the word *experience* exclusively in the latter sense. From this perspective, experience only happens in the here and now. Things that happened in the past are *memories* of experience. I further define *experience* as consisting of four elements: observations, thoughts, feelings, and wants (Bushe, 2001a). At any moment, one can be aware (or only partly aware) of the totality of the experience one is having: the things one sees and hears, one's perceptions and cognitions, the sensations and emotions taking place in one's body, and the desires and motivations animating these.

As each of you reads this chapter, you will be having a unique experience—a multithreaded stream of observations, thoughts, feelings and wants—that is different from everyone else's. Some of that moment-to-moment experience will be related to this chapter and some to your environment, history, interest in this topic, recent coffee consumption, and many other factors. This is true of every interaction. As the interaction takes place, each of us has a personally unique experience.

In a group of people, during the same event, the experience of each person is different, sometimes dramatically so. Most of the managers I have worked with will quickly agree that this happens, but relatively few have thought through the implications for collaborative relationships. Perhaps the most important implication is that experience is not what happens to people but what they do with what happens to them (Short, 1998). Events occurring

outside the person combine with internal cognitive maps, biases, emotional states, and motivations to result in their moment-to-moment experience. So each person, in effect, creates his or her own experience. This generates a dilemma for people trying to collectively learn from their experience together. As many chapters in this book demonstrate, collaboration endures only when partners learn about and adapt their relationship in an ongoing manner.

Learning from experience is often framed as an attempt to analyze the past in order to develop conceptualizations that will better guide future actions (see, for example, Kolb, 1984). If each person is continuously having a personally unique, self-created experience, how do we decide which experience to analyze? Who is having the “right” experience? What are the important thoughts, feelings, and wants for the people in the group to have? Learning from collective experience is a lot more complicated than reflecting on individual experience. (Later I offer a different image of learning from experience, with a different process and purpose for it.)

I believe that one reason why formal, hierarchical structures are so prevalent is that they solve the problem of who is having the right experience—the boss is having the right experience. Cultures of collaboration are inherently based on a different logic, where each person’s experience has equal status and people are supposed to come to agreement through interaction and mutual adjustment. Without an understanding of the nature of experience and how interpersonal mush is created and overcome, the array of experiences occurring at any one moment creates conditions for misunderstandings, poor alignment, and increasing distrust. I believe that this is one reason why so many “successful” experiments in creating collaborative work systems don’t, over time, fulfill their promise (Heller, Pusic, Strauss, and Wilpert, 1998; Weiss and Hughes, 2005). To create cultures of collaboration, we need to figure out how to organize collective action while recognizing that everyone will be having a different experience and treating each person’s experience as legitimate as anyone else’s.

We Need Self-Differentiation

Another serious impediment to clarity and collaboration occurs when people hold others responsible for their experience. When I blame you for my feelings, I’m holding you responsible for my experience. Instead of operating on the assumption that I am creating my experience of you, I’ll either try to avoid you (so I won’t have those feelings) or try to get you to change so I can have a

better experience. Well-intentioned attempts to discuss and work out interpersonal problems don't often make relationships better if people are holding one another responsible for their own experience. The resulting frustration can lead people to think that such conversations are not useful (they're right) and reduce future attempts to clear things up.

If the parties attempting to build cultures of collaboration hold themselves responsible for others' experiences, which seems to me to be fairly prevalent, they will try to "fix" it when others are having "bad" ones. Taking responsibility for other people's experience is a dilemma for persons who are building cultures of collaboration, because it has both positive and negative effects. On the negative side, many people don't like it when others try to "fix their experience"—for example, by giving them a pep talk when they are afraid, trying to make them happy when they are sad, trying to get them to see things differently when they feel remorse, explaining why they shouldn't want something they are frustrated about, and so on. When one person tries to fix another's experience, it creates a transactional imbalance in which the one doing the fixing is the "parent," has their act together, and the one being fixed is the "child," needing help. The person being fixed can feel violated, defensive, or diminished and may resolve to be less forthcoming about his or her experience in the future. Then there are people who like it when others look after their experience. They are quite willing to snuggle into a relationship where, over time, real interdependence is replaced by more or less virulent forms of codependence. In either direction, the motivation to get clear about our different experiences wanes, and interpersonal mush increases and reduces the ability to maintain collaboration over time.

The dilemma is that personal effectiveness requires learning about the impact one has on others and revising one's behavior to have the effect one wants. To be effective, people need to learn about the experience they create in others, work to get their meaning across with minimal distortion, and check to find out if the message received was the message intended. Since personal effectiveness increases one's capacity for collaboration, collaborators face the paradoxical dilemma that sustainable collaboration requires both taking responsibility for other people's experience and not taking responsibility for other people's experience.

In practice, the way out of this dilemma seems to require attaining a state of self-differentiation in relationships (Bowen, 1978). A self-differentiated interaction is one in which you are at once both connected to and separate from the other. You are connected enough to be interested in and listen to the

other's experience but separate enough to not be emotionally hooked and to know your own thoughts, feelings, and wants independent of the other person. Self-differentiation rests on the ability to be aware of your own experience and to be curious about others in a detached way. Valuing and practicing self-differentiation, especially by leaders, appears to be indispensable in organizations in which clarity flourishes (Short, 1991). If people are too connected to each other, holding others responsible for their experience or themselves responsible for other people's experience, they will be afraid of hearing or speaking the truth about anyone's experience because it is too threatening to the relationship. If they are too separate and don't pay attention to the experience of others, they will neglect the maintenance that collaborative relations need. Self-differentiation is the basis for leadership that can create interpersonal clarity and support sustained collaborative relationships. (Bushe, 2001b, 2002).

We Make Up Stories About Each Other's Experience

A related problem we face in creating cultures of collaboration is that we are all sense-making beings (Weick, 1995). All of us work at making sense of whatever is important to us until we are satisfied. In practice, we make up stories about other people's experience to fill in the gaps of what we know or think we know.

In Lynette's story at the start of this chapter, Lynette's colleagues are trying to make sense of her behavior. Notice a few common elements of sense-making processes. One is that her actions are being placed in a larger context: the perceptions people have about the problems in her area. In order to "make sense" of something, it has to fit with what people already believe to be true, the bigger picture. Another is that what she doesn't say or do is given as much scrutiny as what she does say and do. Nonverbal actions are given meaning. Notice that people are making up fantasies about her experience, about what she is thinking, feeling, and wanting. Lynette is, of course, also engaged in sense making about the others. For example, she has a story about why people aren't following up on agreements. Her view of her boss is based on past perceptions of him. To be satisfied with our sense making, current stories have to fit with past sense making. Finally, people are talking to others to try to make sense of Lynette. This is one of the key barriers to creating cultures of collaboration: where there is interpersonal mush, people rarely go to the person they are trying to make sense of to check out their stories. Instead they seek out third parties. When the event they are trying to understand is new or different, they seek

out someone else to help make sense of it. They may seek out others in the organization or others outside the organization, such as a spouse or close friend.

The sense-making process is over when one has a story that one now treats as “the truth.” One no longer treats the story as a possible scenario but as what actually happened and bases future perceptions and actions on these “facts” unless new information surfaces that forces a revision of the story. If the new information is vague and ambiguous, however, it can be easy to ignore or distorted to fit.

So We End Up in Interpersonal Mush

Interpersonal mush is an attribute of an interaction. It exists when two or more people interact on the basis of stories they have made up about each other but not checked out. Given the nature of experience and our compulsion to make sense of those around us, interpersonal mush is the normal, everyday, taken-for-granted climate in which most people live, at home and at work (Bushe, 2001a). Interpersonal mush makes it difficult, perhaps impossible, to create a culture of collaboration even among well-intentioned, highly motivated people.

Interpersonal mush happens when people don't describe the “truth of their experience” and don't inquire into other people's experience but instead make up a story about it. For the most part, this happens because people are afraid of negative repercussions if they do tell the truth about their experience. These include things like hurting other people's feelings, being misunderstood, causing others to act defensively, being forced to justify their experience, and being judged negatively. Since people don't normally describe all or most of their experience, others are compelled to make it up.

Sense making in an environment of interpersonal mush might be neutral if we were as likely to err on the positive as on the negative. Theoretically, it is possible that the story one person makes up gives the other person credit for being more courageous, more concerned, more honest, or more trustworthy than is actually the case. When this happens, people end up on a pedestal that they really don't merit. But that isn't often what happens. Unfortunately, the stories people make up tend to be more negative than the reality. In a vacuum of information, people tend to assume the worst, and this is particularly true in work organizations. As a result of interpersonal mush, what people believe about the organizations they work in and the people they work with is usually worse than the reality. In my thirty years of consulting and studying organi-

zations, I find that executives are often perceived as more heartless and more cruel than they really are, organizations as more political and unbending than they are, coworkers as more insensitive and uncaring than they are, and subordinates as lazier and more careless than they are. This is one reason why, in toxic environments, getting people to share their experience is almost always a powerfully positive intervention (see, for example, Rosenberg, 2004).

Interpersonal mush has numerous negative impacts (Bushe, 2001a). One particularly related to collaboration is the impact on making and keeping agreements. When people who work together don't tell the truth about their experience, organizational meetings fall into a predictable spiral. In formal sessions, things get said, lists get made, and decisions are agreed on. Then people meet in small groups outside the meeting with trusted others to talk about what they really think and feel and want about the topics discussed at the meeting. They say things they don't believe would be acceptable if said during the meetings—usually expressing doubts, concerns, and questions about the topic of discussion. Under conditions of interpersonal mush, what appear to be agreements and consensually made decisions don't get implemented very well, if at all, because people haven't really committed to them. The lack of follow-through decreases people's trust in each other, which feeds the interpersonal mush, and on it goes.

Interpersonal Clarity Is the Antidote

Interpersonal clarity is a state in which each person is aware of his or her own experience, the other's experience, and the differences between them. In practice, that means that each person knows what he or she observes, thinks, feels, and wants and has listened to the other person describe what he or she observes, thinks, feels, and wants without either of them trying to change the other's experience.

The need for interpersonal clarity in ongoing collaboration makes three demands on participants:

- It requires them to explore their own *thinking and observing* and those of others and understand similarities and differences in vision, strategies, goals objectives, and mental maps (Argyris and Schön, 1996). The more such things are on the table for inspection, the greater the ability to find real alignment and support mutual success.

- It requires them to be honest with themselves and others about what they *want* without thinking that simply stating it makes others, especially leaders, responsible for fulfilling it. All forms of win-win conflict resolution and problem solving require clarity about needs and interests in finding successful solutions (Fisher, Ury, and Patton, 1991).
- It requires them to be honest with themselves and others about what they *feel* because people react to each other and make decisions about what to say and do based on what they feel and what they think the other feels (Barrett and Salovey, 2002).

Interpersonal clarity is not the same thing as being “open and honest.” In fact, I believe that advising people to be “open and honest” doesn’t really work. People think being open and honest is risky; they equate it with being honest about their judgments or expressing their feelings—both of which can damage work relationships. Hurling judgments at others is rarely useful for building any kind of relationship and more often leads to hard feelings and deteriorating relations. That’s why people learn not to be open and honest in the first place. Expressing feelings (hugging others when happy, crying when sad, storming about when angry) in nonintimate relationships can push people away because of the power strong feelings can have on irrational behavior. Interpersonal clarity is not about being intimate—it does not require telling others about your life and your hopes and dreams or expressing the fullness of your being in their presence.

Interpersonal clarity is about being “transparent,” about letting others know what your in-the-moment experience (observations, thoughts, feelings, wants) is so that they will make up more accurate stories about you. It’s about calmly and dispassionately describing (not expressing) what you are feeling. It’s about putting on the table the observations and mental maps that are leading you to your judgments without assuming that your judgments and maps are “the truth” or that the other person has the same observations or maps as you.

If the purpose of collaboration is supporting mutual success, collaborators need to be clear about all the elements of experience, what each observes, thinks, feels, and wants. Creating a relationship where people are willing to tell each other the truth about their experience requires assuming that each of us is having a different experience, we all have a right to our own experience, we are not responsible for each other’s experience, and we can find real agreement and alignment by sharing this information. No matter how skilled or aware people are, they can’t stop themselves from sense making, and inevitably inter-

personal mush creeps into the relationship. Cleaning out the mush is crucial for the maintenance of a collaborative relationship, and that requires a periodic concerted effort such as an organizational learning conversation.

Organizational Learning Gets Us There

An organizational learning conversation is a process of talking and listening to each other until interpersonal clarity is achieved (Bushe, 2001a). I wrote my first paper on organizational learning as a doctoral student in 1979. It wasn't very grounded, and I spent many years looking for instances of learning that were truly organizational, where what was learned didn't reside only in some individuals but rather was encoded into the organization itself (Duncan and Weiss, 1979). This led me to think about what an organization is. Is an organization its buildings and machinery? Few would say so. Is it its strategy and goals? Strategies and goals come and go, and organizations persist. Is an organization its people? That's a popular cliché but hardly true—people come and go, and the organization remains the same. I've come to conclude that an organization is its patterns of organizing (Hedberg, 1981; Herbst, 1962), the patterns of interaction at work that take place day in and day out. These patterns are maintained by the conversations that take place (and don't take place) and the meanings people construct out of their interactions. If a team or organization really learns and changes, the change is manifested in those patterns of interaction; otherwise after an organizational change process that did not change the patterns of interaction, people will say that "nothing changed."

What's learning? Learning is the acquisition and use of new knowledge that comes from an inquiry of some sort. New knowledge that comes without inquiry is revelation, not learning. Learning requires use of the knowledge acquired for its effects to be sustained, perhaps even to be able to say that learning has taken place (Kolb, 1984). Learning should be evident in the changes we and others experience from its use.

Combining these definitions of learning and organization, I propose that organizational learning occurs when two or more people inquire in a way that results in new knowledge and alters their patterns of organizing. What I call an organizational learning conversation does that. In it, people (usually two but sometimes more) take turns describing their experience (observations, thoughts, feelings, and wants) and listening to the other's, usually about some pattern of organizing that is unsatisfactory to one or both. They use the conversation to

obtain deeper insight into their own experience, a grounded sense of the other's experience, and figure out how they are each creating their own unsatisfactory experience. By doing so, they clear out the interpersonal mush and replace it with interpersonal clarity; very often this in itself leads to a positive change in the relationship and the resolution of whatever problem motivated the conversation in the first place.

Exhibit 8.1 presents an example of a learning conversation on a team living in the kind of interpersonal clarity that sustains a culture of collaboration. As I play back this interaction in the left-hand column, I take note in the right-hand column the organizational learning skills the participants are using to achieve interpersonal clarity.

EXHIBIT 8.1. A LEARNING CONVERSATION.

It has been four months since the president, Pierre, declared his and the board's intent to change the sole emphasis the organization has had for the past ten years on product A and introduce a new product, B. As he sits in a meeting of his executive committee, Pierre is worried that Stan, the vice president of the unit responsible for manufacturing product A, is resisting this change. He was very unhappy with Stan's performance at yesterday's board meeting, where he seemed confused and not in line with the new strategy, and concerned by the negative reactions some board members expressed once Stan had left the room. He values Stan, who has been an outstanding performer for many years, but realizes that he really doesn't know what Stan thinks about the change in strategy. As the discussion turns to the new strategy, the president takes the lead in being transparent about his own experience and seeking clarity about Stan's.

Pierre: Stan, I was somewhat puzzled after the board meeting yesterday, and so I would like to clarify where each of us stands on the product B strategy. I raise this now because it affects all of us, and we all need to be clear about what each of us thinks about this. So let me begin. I was concerned by your apparent confusion at the meeting, since I thought we had discussed the new product strategy thoroughly and were all in complete agreement. It raises in my mind some doubts as to whether you really support the product B strategy, and

Notice that Pierre does not lead with judgments he has made about Stan's performance or his own sense making. Instead, he describes his observations, feelings, and wants and puts his sense making (doubts about Stan's support for product B) into a context that leaves him open to hearing something different—he is describing his experience in a way that invites the other person to describe his as well.

EXHIBIT 8.1. A LEARNING CONVERSATION, Cont'd.

frankly, I'm starting to be concerned that you might resist it because you're afraid it will take resources away from product A. I want you to be upfront about where you stand on this, and I want us to find a way for you to feel fully behind both product A and product B.

(Stan, who is visibly disturbed by Pierre's remarks, does not respond to Pierre's statements but asks questions to get more clarity about Pierre's perceptions before reacting to what he is hearing.)

Stan: Could you tell me what, exactly, I did that caused you concern at the meeting?

Pierre: When you were fielding questions, you made a number statements that are contrary to the strategy the board has endorsed. For example, when Brian asked about the marketing strategy, you talked about building on the brand recognition of product A when we had already decided that it's better to keep the two products distinct in our clients' eyes.

Stan: Any other things?

Pierre: Well, yes. Your response to Marilyn about product launch and what you said to Hersch about expected cost of capital were not what we had agreed to.

Stan: Just so I'm clear, Pierre, can you tell me what you think I said and what we've agreed to?

(Pierre described what he heard Stan say at the meeting and what he thinks was wrong with what Stan said.)

Stan: OK, I think I see what you're unhappy about, but before I react to what you've said, Pierre, I want to check if there are any other reasons why you think I might not be fully behind the change.

Pierre: Well, I guess I was also taken aback a week or so ago in a conversation I had with Barbara

Notice that Stan does not respond to or try to change Pierre's experience before he fully understands it. This seems to be crucial to successful learning conversations—one person tries to fully explore and understand the other's experience before responding to it in any way. Doing this requires a fairly high degree of self-differentiation—not taking responsibility for Pierre's experience and getting bent out of shape if Pierre is not having the experience Stan would prefer.

By first exploring Pierre's experience, Stan uncovers more information (about conversations with Stan's subordinates) that might not have come up if all they talked about was the board meeting, and this not only helps him understand Pierre's sense making but also turns out later to be crucial information for the whole group. Notice also that by trying to understand Pierre's experience, issues that are ultimately more important surface, and this would not have happened if this had been framed as a problem to be solved—how to get Stan to do better at board meetings.

EXHIBIT 8.1. A LEARNING CONVERSATION, Cont'd.

(one of Stan's direct reports), who seemed to have some pretty confused fears about what effects this change might have on your department. Then I noticed a similar set of thoughts coming from Kevin, another of your managers. It got me wondering just how much of that is coming from you.

Stan: Were they talking about having to shift people to the new business unit? (Pierre nods.) Yeah, I know what you're talking about. Anything else causing you to wonder where I'm at?

Pierre: No, that's about it.

Stan: OK, well, let me start by saying that I'm somewhat surprised by all this. I had no idea that things went sideways at the board meeting, so I guess I'm glad you're telling me about it, and I do want you to know that I'm fully behind product B. Let me deal with the meeting issues first. With Hersch, I think I must have just not gotten my thoughts out clearly because I agree with what you are saying about our financing and how much debt we're willing to take on. But I have to tell you that I am confused about our marketing strategy and launch plans because I thought we had decided to build on the brand recognition and tie in with product A.

Pierre: No, no—that was decided at least a month ago.

Robert: I have to tell you. Pierre, I'm with Stan on that one—I thought the opposite as well.

Susan: I didn't know a decision had been made.

Pierre: I don't understand this. We talked about this issue for weeks, and then at the last meeting of the board's Strategy Committee, a decision was made to keep the two products separate and distinct in our sales campaign.

Stan begins by describing his here-and-now experience—thoughts, feelings, and wants—so that whatever sense making others are doing about this interaction will be more accurate. Then he responds to what Pierre has just said and describes his thoughts and feelings.

Here we see one big reason why it so useful for individuals to have learning conversations with their teams present. Many people prefer to have such conversations in private, if at all. But real collaboration and organizational learning require a willingness to have these kinds of conversations out in the open where the variety of experiences

EXHIBIT 8.1. A LEARNING CONVERSATION, Cont'd.

Robert: Well, I remember the discussions, but I thought we were all leaning toward product tie-in. I don't remember hearing that the Strat Committee had made a decision.

Errol: I knew about it from the meeting you had with the marketing group, Pierre, but I don't know if it ever came up here.

Pierre: Oh, hell, I thought I had announced that at our last meeting.

(Pierre tells the group about the decision made by the board's Strategy Committee and provides the committee's rationale. A discussion ensues, and it becomes clear that this is the first time the group has heard about and discussed this decision.

Stan: To finish off with the issues you were bringing up, Pierre, it's true that people in my unit are afraid that they are going to lose resources to product B. I don't think it's going to be nearly as drastic as some fear, but obviously, some resources are going to be redirected, and we haven't yet decided what this is going to be. Frankly, I think the sooner we decide that the better because the uncertainty is fueling a lot of speculation and there's not a lot I can tell folks to calm them down. But you need to understand that as far as I'm concerned, bringing on product B is absolutely essential to the future health of our company and I am 100 percent behind it.

Pierre: I'm glad to hear that, Stan. But why are your people not on the bus too?

Stan: Oh, I don't think anyone questions the wisdom of moving into the product B space, Pierre. It's just that no one's sure what the ramifications for product A will be, and that is stirring up a lot of rumors and unfounded

can be surfaced and integrated. It just takes a higher degree of self-differentiation for Stan to be able to remain calm and listen when such a potentially embarrassing interaction begins.

Having gotten interpersonal clarity about the experience Stan and Pierre had about the product B strategy, they can now explore the real issues underlying those experiences. Here we see a leader, Pierre, willing to hear and explore experiences that are different from his own and in that process creating a space where real collaboration can flourish.

Imagine what might have happened if they did not have this conversation? Pierre would have developed doubts about Stan's commitment and would probably have continued to gather ever more data to support his fears. He would have thought the team was on board with the marketing strategy, not realizing it hadn't even been

EXHIBIT 8.1. A LEARNING CONVERSATION, Cont'd.

gossip. Last week someone asked me if we were closing down the product A unit!

Pierre: That's ridiculous! Product A is the core of this company. Isn't that obvious?

Stan: I think it is to us, but apparently there is some confusion in the ranks.

Errol: I have to agree with Stan, Pierre. A couple of days ago, I overheard a conversation in the cafeteria where some people were guessing how the product A unit was going to be reorganized.

Stan: I think the buzz coming from below is causing some of the concerns you are hearing from my managers, Pierre.

Pierre: Are any of the rest of you picking this up?

(The group launches into a discussion about the effects of implementing the new strategy on the organization's culture, with its ten-year history solely focused on product A. Some of this is news to Pierre, and together the group develops a picture of a pattern of misperceptions and misguided fears that are surfacing in the organization. Everyone affirms that product A is still the backbone of the company and that a new emphasis on product B should not have to mean a decrease in support for product A.)

Pierre: We'd better do something to clear up the confusion we've created. I think Collette's team on resourcing product B is just about finished. I'll ask her to speed up, and we can use her report to make some clear announcements throughout the company that will end the uncertainties about who is going to be working where. Susan, can you get the communications people geared up for this? I want to make it a priority. We don't need a lot of unfounded fears and rumors undermining our efforts to get product B to market quickly and effectively.

discussed. And perhaps most important, the group would not have developed a common understanding of the unwarranted fears and rumors swirling through the organization and been able to take action to ameliorate the situation. It is through their willingness to be clear about their experience with one another that they can truly support the success of the process (introduction of new product B) they are jointly engaged in, which is what collaboration is all about.

EXHIBIT 8.1. A LEARNING CONVERSATION, Cont'd.

Pierre: I'm sure glad we had this conversation, though I'm a little sorry that it started from my misgivings about you, Stan. I see that I have some responsibility for what happened at the board meeting yesterday, so it looks like I owe you an apology.

Stan: Thanks, Pierre, but I have to take some responsibility for not having checked my facts before the presentation. I wonder if we can huddle before board meetings in the future, just to make sure I have my ducks in line.

Pierre: That sounds like a fine idea.

The learning conversation comes to a close with Stan and Pierre describing what they have learned in creating this experience for themselves and agreeing on a plan for future interactions.

Having learning conversations that turn interpersonal mush into clarity requires some skills in addition to the capacity for self-differentiation. In general, these are awareness of one's experience, an ability to describe it to others in ways that avoid defensiveness and reactivity, an ability to inquire into other people's experience that helps them understand their own experience and makes them willing to tell their truth, and an ability to maintain an appreciative mind-set, to look for the positive intent behind what might appear to be negative actions (Bushe, 2001a).

Interpersonal Clarity in Organizations Depends on Certain Cultural Assumptions

There are a number of assumptions that support the creation and maintenance of a collaborative culture based on interpersonal clarity. I identify thirteen of them here (see Exhibit 8.2). My experience is that if people do not hold and act on these assumptions, real collaboration is hard to sustain.

To begin with is the assumption that each of us creates our own experience (assumption 1). Even when we witness the same event, are part of the same interaction, it is useful to assume that we may be having very different thoughts, feelings, observations and wants and not assume that others see it the same way we do (assumption 2).

EXHIBIT 8.2. THIRTEEN ESSENTIAL ASSUMPTIONS FOR A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE.

1. We each create our own experience.
 2. In every interaction, every participant is having a different experience.
 3. Everyone has a right to his or her own experience.
 4. Each person's experience has equal status, although when it comes to objective issues, some may be more valid than others.
 5. If I don't explicitly state what my experience is, others will make something up and treat that as if it's the truth.
 6. It's generally useful to describe my experience to others with whom I want to collaborate and ask them to describe theirs.
 7. Although it takes effort, it's good to be aware of my own in-the-moment experience.
 8. Though I am compelled to make up stories about the experiences of significant others, I must maintain awareness of the difference between what I really know and what I'm making up.
 9. By listening to others relate their experience without my trying to change or fix it, I can obtain more accurate information.
 10. I need to work on being sufficiently separate from yet connected to the people I want to collaborate with.
 11. To create clarity, I have to tell others my wants without expecting that those wants will be satisfied.
 12. I am creating the impact other people have on me.
 13. When I'm having unsatisfactory interactions with someone I want to collaborate with, we need to have an organizational learning conversation.
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Collaboration is based on the assumption and behaviors of interdependence, a relationship where people are assumed to have equal rights (assumption 3). Such a relationship can't be sustained if some people's experience is given more status or validity than others or where people try to change each other's experiences, no matter how noble their intentions. I might go as far as to argue that sustainable collaboration requires that we fully respect other people's experiences and let them have their own experience, no matter how painful they might appear. That is different, however, from the extreme post-

modern position that everyone's experience is equally valid. When it comes to objective issues—things that can be assessed independently of anyone's perceptions—some observations and thoughts may be more valid than others (assumption 4).

When people lack information about the experience of others, they are compelled to make up stories to fill in the gaps. Interactions are based on stories people have made up about each other, which they accept as “truth” (assumption 5). Over time, these stories tend to become more negative than reality and diminish the ability to collaborate successfully. Interpersonal mush is the normal, taken-for-granted environment in which work relationships (perhaps all relationships) exist unless people actively work at developing interpersonal clarity—a state in which each person knows what his or her own experience is, what the other's experience is, and the difference between them. Treating all experience as legitimate and not trying to change others' experiences when they are being described supports people's willingness to be clear with each other.

If I don't say what my experience is others will make it up and treat it as if it is the truth. (assumption 5). Therefore, I need to be willing to describe my experience to others, which can feel risky at times, but that is when it is usually most important (assumption 6). To be able to do that, I have to be aware of what my experience is, and for most of us, that takes effort (assumption 7). We can probably never be fully aware of the totality of our experience, even after years of psychotherapy or meditation, and learning conversations are an important contributor to self-awareness.

Though we are compelled to make up stories about the experience of significant others, we can know and maintain awareness of the difference between what we really know and what we are making up (assumption 8). That is essential if we are going to be able to understand other people's actual experiences and to learn from our collective experience. By listening to others relate their experience, without trying to change or fix it, we can obtain more accurate information (assumption 9).

One of the things that makes it so difficult to create interpersonal clarity is the tendency to manage relationships by either becoming so closely connected that I take responsibility for your experience (or make you responsible for mine) or being so far apart that I don't even think of considering your experience. Interdependence and collaboration need people to value and practice self-differentiation (assumption 10).

One place where this shows up a lot is in managing expression of wants. People can be hesitant to ask others what they want if they think they will then be held responsible for fulfilling them (or fear that others will hold them responsible). So instead of getting a clear idea of what others want, people make it up, and the interpersonal mush deepens. That is different from a negotiation or contract kind of conversation, which also needs to take place in a collaborative relationship where you are getting a clear picture of what wants will be satisfied. The most important wants to be clear about are in-the-moment wants such as what I want from this interaction, what I want you to know about me, and the impact I want to be having on you (assumption 11).

Finally, sustained collaboration requires that we learn from our collective experience and that we occasionally take time to inquire into and learn about our patterns of interaction, both productive and unproductive, and work toward changing the patterns that are dissatisfying or in some way threaten our collaboration. Sense-making processes being what they are, whenever there is a problem in a work relationship, it is often too clear to each person how the other's behavior is the problem. If only the other person would change, everything would be fine! Such conversations need to be guided by the assumption that since I create my own experience, I am creating the impact you have on me (assumption 12). In any two-person relationship, each person is 50 percent responsible for what is going on. Therefore, the final and perhaps most important assumption for sustained collaborative relationships is that when we are having an unsatisfactory interaction with a person we want to collaborate with, a learning conversation is required (assumption 13).

Conclusion

The approach described in this chapter, which I have used with great success for more than a decade in a variety of organizations, works because most of the time it is interpersonal mush that is causing a hoped-for collaborative relationship to fall apart. Clear out the mush—create interpersonal clarity—and the problem often goes away.

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