

## Case Study – Gestalt Facilitation in Action within a Consultancy

*Paul Barber*

*“Contemporary society worships at the alter of functionalism. Concepts such as process, method, model and project have come to infiltrate our language and determine how we describe our relation to the world. The recovery of soul means the a rediscovery of Otherness; this would awaken again the sense of mystery, possibility and compassion. Stated philosophically, being could find expression in doing” (O’Donohue 1997, p179).*

**Preamble:** *This study examines an organisational consultation which arose from crisis within a corporate body. From a consultant and client viewpoint it describes the demands of working with an organisation in a period of acute distress. Periodically, ‘X’, a senior manager – a client within the organisation concerned – illuminates parts of the field hidden from the consultant under sub-headings of ‘Reflections upon the Hidden Agenda’. By this means covert and hidden manifestations of the organisation, the consultation and its effects are contrasted so that the reader might better appreciate the shadow side of consultancy. Data is primarily drawn from a consultancy field journal of events, which recorded my feelings and thoughts at the time plus the fruits of collaborative inquiry performed within the various organisational meetings. The consultancy approach portrayed here illuminates a dialogical and phenomenological approach to consciousness raising and conflict resolution in the Gestalt style.*

### i) **An Invitation to the Relational Dance** (The Orientation Phase)

*We must surrender ourselves to chaos and experience its lessons if we are to harvest Its fruits; without letting go of the known, throwing away our intellectual maps and by engagement with the unknown, chaos can not be transformed into a new order.*

(June) A colleague supervising a senior manager hears from his supervisee that an external consultant is being sought to facilitate change. As he feels too close to the company due to an existent supervisor-supervisee relationship, he mentions my name as a possible replacement.

In due course a letter arrives:

*"I spoke to your colleague (...) earlier this week about a communication workshop (...) We would need to have a meeting beforehand for us to brief you on the organisation and why we feel we need a workshop on the subject of communication."*

Telephone communication follows. I learn there are ‘communication problems’, that ‘offices are dispersed between floors’, that ‘communication did not pass downwards’ and

that 'expansion was currently being proposed'. But before this planned expansion can happen it is noted that 'communication needs to be sorted'. By the end of this telephone call a fee has been set and two dates proposed when I can meet with 'the Planning Group' who have been empowered by Senior Management to contract and brief me.

As I put down the phone I begin to suspect that a 'communications workshop' is but the tip of the ice-bergh and that a larger agenda is lurking.

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### ***Reflections upon the Hidden Agenda:***

*X (A senior officer within the organisation): My first reaction to seeing again the letter inviting Paul to run a workshop on communication is one of amazement – the stunned variety not the excited variety! We needed far more than a workshop to address problems of communication in our organisation. Yes, we had problems with communication. The Management group recognised this – usually expressed in terms of 'problems with making decisions'. We even had brought in a previous consultant to work with us, look at our process and help us with a major planning task, but had colluded with her in not looking at our difficulties; using her time to help us make decisions. However, these decisions were "fought" rather than "thought through". The expansion plan that emerged showed this weakness. It lacked sound financial thinking, there was insufficient consideration of the impact of major change, there had been no preparatory consultation, and little thought had been given to the process of implementation. This led to open expression of a lack of confidence in the Management Group and considerable discussion about inadequate communication in the organisation.*

*This 'crisis' finally led to agreement that we needed to do something about communication. The letter to Paul reveals that we were not as a group facing the obvious conclusion, that the source of communication difficulties was a consequence of our own difficulties.*

*Simply, the Management Team was not a team. We had no common agreement on values, goals, objectives or priorities - where there was agreement this was through linguistic compromise - we could find words that we could all more or less sign up to, but the degree to which we fought over the differences that emerged when we needed more than the agreed words, varied from major battle one day, to squabbling and bickering another, to tired resignation another. There was rarely resolution.*

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### **ii) Entering the Body of the Organisational Beast (The Identification Phase)**

*When entering an unpredictable situation accept it openly and wholeheartedly, flow with its energy and allow your own energy to support you – this will integrate the inner to the outer world and the known to the unknown.*

(July) On the appointed day I travel to 'Head Office'. Upon the train into London I surface a pre-consultancy intention to stay open, receptive, and to work in an organic way with what ever arises – so as to 'pick up' the emotional tone of the organisational community I am

journeying to meet. Though my intention at this time is to observe, I am all too aware that I am not a blank slate, for I notice I carry biases and values born of earlier consultancies with me; I am also a committed Gestalt practitioner and will tend to work in the 'process-centred' way this describes! This prior knowledge contends for attention and enacts a tug-of-war with my intended observational role. By being aware of what I am transferring-in, I hope to be able to balance and monitor how this may colour my vision. In fact, my consultancy vision during this period was heavily informed by a model which presumed the client-practitioner relationship would journey through stages of:

- 1) **Orientation:** where the consultant and client meet, sketch an initial contract, orientate to each others world-view and begin to form a working alliance;
- 2) **Identification:** where the consultant and client identify problem areas and prospective strategies, refine the contract and raise to awareness the purposes and tasks of consultancy;
- 3) **Exploration:** where the consultant and client work together to implement the strategies they have chosen, modify these in the light of feedback and decide future steps;
- 4) **Resolution:** where the consultant and client evaluate outcomes, review follow-up, complete the consultancy and work towards a positive ending of their relationship.

This approach, derived from study of the therapeutic relationship (Peplau 1952) and refined through doctoral study (Barber 1990), along with a personal desire to 'do well' constitutes a little of the transference baggage I carried into the host organisation and this consultation.

It is a wet misty day. The building I am about to enter presents a formal front but has an informal atmosphere within. The reception area is small and womb-like with chirpy friendly multi-racial staff. I am expected and so directed to the fourth floor. The lift is tiny and rumbles towards its destination. I get out on the third floor and walk to the fourth. Though the building looks large enough from the outside, offices appear small and cramped. I wonder if people here feel psychologically cramped and on-top of one-another? As I rise from the ground to fourth floor, the pace of the building appears to slow down. While the reception and ground floor felt bustling and physically crowded the upper floors feel introverted and isolated. I wondered if this metaphor would hold true for the organisation and its senior management.

A large double room has been arranged overlooking the roof-tops of London. The building, this sky-lighted room we are in, the misty day and the rainy roof-top view before me combine to give a Nineteenth Century Dickensian feel.

As people arrive and the Planning Group forms a great deal of information is rapidly showered upon me. Individuals seem relieved to talk. How much of this information is useful and how much is superfluous only time will tell, but, the act of unburdening themselves and depositing upon me all that was previously withheld seems to offer much relief in itself. I feel as if I am being set up, imaginatively, to 'save' the organisation from itself. This projection leaves me feeling the more alien and unmet, yet sufficiently empowered and energetically impacted to meet any challenge that awaits me. I guess I'm up to playing a saviour for a little while if it can illuminate some of what remains in shadow!

I feel warmly welcomed and glean an impression that I am being asked, symbolically, to 'make things better'. I wonder if at heart they want a consultant when they really need a counsellor. The consultant as an organisational healer springs to mind. Possibly all this is symptomatic of much having been tried before, and in this light I wonder if

I am being seen as the last hope? I do not play expert, but rather stay curious and enquiring. This said, I find myself treated cautiously and courteously – like a respected maiden aunt. This kid-glove approach fuels my suspicion. If this were a mystery thriller I would suspect a dark secret was being withheld from me. This fantasy catches my attention and stays to the fore of my awareness.

After a period of further introductions and even more information I give my fantasy full-rein and decide to challenge the polite remoteness I am experiencing, and find myself going for the jugular by asking: “If this organisation were an animal, what sort might it be?” So much for my earlier intention on the incoming train to stay a remote observer! This intervention has a profound effect; my notes recall members offering the following symbols:

- "- a donkey running round in circles chasing its tail;*
- an animal that is bumbling and fluffy;*
- a bear with a sore paw;*
- a beast without all its limbs attached and/or out of co-ordination;*
- an animal in a zoo, caged and going around and around;*
- a creature that has lost its sexual energy and never has fun."*

As Sherlock Holmes would say, ‘the game's afoot’.

Symbolically, the impression is loud and clear, the organisation has lost its way and purpose; seems to bumble around and fluff its boundaries and roles; is recovering from a previous wound; feels stuck and immobile; trapped and fearing for its future.

The above symbols indeed herald the facts, which subsequently bring these imaginative images to life. As a government funded body I hear that the organisation ‘does what it is told’, for if it doesn't ‘it's funding will be withdrawn’ and it will ‘crash’. This suspicion fuels the fear that one more crisis could spell the end. It is also disclosed that half a million pounds was saved by a previous consultant who recommended redundancies. In light of this information no wonder I was being treated carefully and cautiously, as external consultants – of whom I am one must obviously awaken fears of another round of job losses. Though I thought I was being fêted as a saviour, possible it was the shadow of the executioner that hung over me. In this light, was I selected because I was seen to be a person-centred and potentially ‘caring’ consultant rather than one who was cash-savings and economically driven; all this races through my mind as I continue to soak-in the atmosphere.

I hear that ‘faith in management is at its lowest ebb’; that a legal entanglement concerning computer access and ‘confidentiality’ has resulted in an official inquiry with accompanying police investigation, ensuing formal reprimands and blame being shunted between several people. I form an impression that this ‘organisational family’ is at war, with siblings rivalling each other for the attention and support of powerful seniors. Team managers seem to represent tribal sub-groups and senior managers appear to be remote and unworthy of trust. No doubt they, as well as those they manage, end-up feeling isolated and without support?

I muse that management and service-staff are possibly split and polarised into blaming each other for the chaos they feel and experience within themselves, as in an emotional climate such as this projections can be expected to carry more weight than ‘mere’ facts.

To help allay the anxiety and misinterpretation my entry to the organisation may have caused, and in an effort to prevent further splits, I make it clear that I will “work in an open above board way with service and managerial staff alike”. This is not well received, and there is a good deal of pressure from the Planning Group for me to work separately with management and service. Though I am agreeable to approaching each group as a separate entity, at least initially, if an organisational split exists between the shop-floor and senior managers, I state I will “need to bring the various groups together in some way to investigate, and if need be challenge the isolationism I have heard described” here in this room today.

After further discussion the Planning Group, primarily concerned with pouring oil on the existent troubled waters rally’s behind the medium of a “Communications Day” to illuminate the way forward.

By the end of the meeting I feel very well briefed indeed – if not over-briefed. We have generated several options of an educative and supervisory nature, which I agree to write-up for circulation through-out the working community, so as to make everything public property, above board and up for discussion at all levels of the organisation. Dialogue first with the various sub-groups, then with the organisation as a whole is accepted as a worthwhile strategy.

Some days later when the information I had been fed begins to settle, I send the following correspondence for general circulation:

*"I confirm that I will be with you on the 27th July (...) my intention is open up discussion around the needs, wants, and ways forward, the various groups perceive as necessary to improve communication and interrelationships. To enable this process I intend to:*

- work in a fluid way;*
- facilitate brainstorming as to what people need;*
- compile information for general circulation post the event.(...)*

*Re the themes we discussed in the last planning meeting, these seemed to cluster around the following:*

- the need to foster effective organisational communication, both vertically and horizontally, centrally and regionally;*
- the need to work with the various staff splits, notably between `management' and `service staff' who see change as occurring without consultation;*
- to explore where feelings go in the organisation, especially how these get negatively displaced upon the work culture and others;*
- exploring ways feelings might be healthily expressed and the type of venue most appropriate for this.(...)*

*On the positive side, people were noted to be committed to their work, highly motivated, and attentive and caring towards their clients. The shadow side of this, such as anger, frustration and resentment, were suggested to be acted out in inter-staff relationships within the organisation.*

*Continuing our imaginative exploration of 'the problem', we noted that if the organisation were a family, it would produce children who:*

- had multiple fathers, and hence did not look or speak alike;*
- would squabble, but all love their mum;*
- could go to a wedding and pretend to be a 'real family', by putting on a show for the audience;*
- be good at showing off their party pieces, but, as people, would tend to keep their hurts to themselves."*

I closed the above correspondence with a request for this correspondence to be circulated to all levels of the organisation, enclosed a list of strategic ways forward, a scale of fees for the activities suggested and my CV.

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### ***Reflections upon the Hidden Agenda:***

*X: From my view-point this first briefing meeting felt liberating - it was the first time that I felt able in a group of staff and managers to talk openly about how the organisation felt to me. The invitation to use metaphors liberated me from my internal debate about loyalty and blame and enabled me to talk about how it felt to be in this organisation. In other cross organisational groups and my team, I was always aware that I was a manager, I could talk only about the manifestations of difficulties - not what I thought were the causes or how I felt. The management team had always been an unsafe place to discuss feelings, other than overwork and stress.*

*In using metaphors it was possible to see a picture building up of the organisation as it felt to those of us in it - and for the picture to be based on our feelings rather than our judgements. As Paul notes, we had a tendency to blame rather than challenge. There was the potential here for the family secret - already known by the children but never discussed by the adults - to come out.*

*It was exciting to receive notes of the Briefing Meeting, reminding the Planning Group and telling the rest of the organisation of the pictures we drew - even now their vividness and aptness is striking. They were more powerful than any description of a dysfunctional organisation in traditional 'consultant-speak'. I had not expected these to be made public - I had not thought that our feelings really would be aired. As Paul notes, there was a tendency to keep our hurts to ourselves.*

*Paul did not use his authority to analyse the organisational difficulties, but to feed us back our own picture - as it was; he then used his expertise to suggest ways we might continue to develop or work. The nearest he came to giving his opinion of the organisation was in describing the shadow that appeared to be acted out in the organisation.*

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### iii) **The Facilitator as Go-Between** (The Exploration Phase)

*If you see in any given situation only what everybody else can see and are infected merely with common sense, you are in danger of being so representative of your culture and society that you have become a victim of it – your only hope at this stage is to rebel.*

(Early August) On the appointed 'Communications Day' I returned to organisation. I first meet the Planning Group and am updated to the expectations, resistances and effects this planned day has stimulated within the work community. As the Planning Group is responsible for arranging the day they are openly worried as to how it might go? This concern comes through in the torrent of informational over-kill that flood in my direction. So when they tell me everything they know will they feel better? Or less responsible for what unfolds? I am not without my own anxieties; this is the crunch-point and a large group awaits me. Thankfully, I also learn that my C.V. and letter to the Planning Group have all been circulated without censorship.

Some thirty minutes later I meet with the large multi-racial Staff Group consisting of some thirty female workers. This meeting starts slowly, builds up momentum and by the end is invigorating. People appear to leave with a buzz. It seems the unspoken has been said and people were pleased and excited to have been heard. Consent is given by the Staff Group for me to write up what has transpired and to circulate this throughout the organisation – what transpired will be shared later in this account.

Post lunch I met with the Management Group. This group is white, predominately male and considerably more restrained and formal – a stiff 'grown-up' parental sort of a group as it were. Where the Staff group felt vibrant, young, 'sexy' and expressive of their emotional energies, the Management group withholds and contains its expression deep within. 'Parent' to 'Child' comparisons spring readily to mind.

There is not much fun, sexiness or joy in the Management Group. I imagine this is indicative of how it feels to be a manager here, in that your vibrancy and life go on the back-burner? This said a deep sense of care and commitment permeates our meeting. While the Staff Group felt primed for a party, this group feels like it spends its time indoors, smokes a pipe and sits before a radiator – rather than a cosy fire. There was no sense of Eros, sensuality or moistness, but a great sense of duty, back-breaking responsibility and loneliness. I guess you would soon hear when the Staff were upset but would never hear a squeak from the managers? Even though they might be suffering twice as much?

I leave the Management Group to meet with the Planning Group for debriefing. The day is felt to have gone well and to have taken the lid off issues earlier denied. The impression, is, that 'work could now begin'.

My report and recommendations enter general circulation within the organisation a week later and take the following form which is circulated to everyone:

#### **"REPORT OF THE 'COMMUNICATIONS DAY"**

##### ***THE PLANNING GROUP (11-11.30)***

*Organisationally, there appeared to be an acute problem - concerning trauma in one of the divisions, and a chronic problem - concerning general communication.*

*It was suggested that the Planning Group act as a think-tank for the various ideas that arose from the day, and that others be invited to attend this group to encourage wider interest and a sharing of power.*

*By the end of this meeting I felt people were enthusiastic to 'get going', a little fearful of what might happen but relieved that something was at last happening.*

**STAFF GROUP (11.30-1 o/c)**

*My first impression was that people were friendly, feeling a bit unsure as they had never met together on this scale before, and were depending on me to get things going. I started the ball rolling by asking people what they wanted or expected of me? They appeared well informed as to the purpose of the day and rapidly began to share what they saw as communication problems at work and in the organisation as a whole. As we began to talk about specific issues energy rose.*

*By the close of the session all people appeared to have had a say.*

*My impression is one of a well motivated, articulate and intelligent group who lack a shared consensual identity. The reasons given for this were the work-forces segregation into different teams, the lack of formal reasons to meet, their isolation on different floors, the initial lack of trust in each other within this newly formed large group.*

*The themes we identified as hindering communication within the organisation included:*

- A lack of consensus as to what the organisation was seen to be; depending upon whom you spoke to the answers differed; different teams seemed to emphasise different aspects of the organisation. All this was reported to be confusing and anxiety producing and made difficult 'what you were supposed to say to external agencies' that people dealt with here on a day to day basis.*
- Communication with the management team was also seen as problematic; instructions travelled downwards well enough, but there was little evidence that feedback travelled back upwards to inform policy making.*

*Simply, people felt excluded from the decision making process. In this light, the management team appeared to go its own way independent from the work-force. It was suggested that managers competed amongst themselves, fought long and hard for their own specialisation but had little appreciation of the needs or views of others. Staff, in general felt they were poorly represented at senior levels. It was also suggested that management spent too much time 'managing the concept of the organisation' and too little time 'managing people'.*

*Consistency was similarly seen to be missing between departments. Because similar issues were handled differently across the organisation, staff did not know how or where they stood from one department to another. Policy appeared to be made up on the spot rather than worked to as a guiding principle.*



*People did not feel valued or listened to; this was seen to be a management blind-spot. It was observed that in five years of working within the organisation many major crises and redundancies had been endured; consequentially, faith in job security was weak and people feared speaking their mind for fear that they would be the first to go!*

*We brainstormed the following statements to present to management:*

- 1. Get trained.*
- 2. Manage us not the organisational concept.*
- 3. Identify our role, supervise us, and give us feedback.*
- 4. Learn to support us, handle the emotional process as well as the task, listen to us and be consistent.*
- 5. Swop roles with us for a time to appreciate what we do.*
- 6. Swop departments and see how others operate.*
- 7. You only come down to us when you're lost or going to the loo, come and talk to us especially about work related issues.*
- 8. Show interest in us as people.*
- 9. Stop managing us as a girl's school, with managers acting as head prefects.*
- 10. Be consistent with each situation.*

*It was decided that I would feed these comments back to the management group when we meet again, but not until managers had also been submitted to the same facilitative challenges I had put to the Staff Group.*

*Generally, staff felt they had been unseen and unheard for far too long and were now determined to be heard. Perhaps the current 'crises', in an opportune way, had provided a means to alert management to staff feelings? It was observed that crises often happened in organisations when staff feel unsupported, morale is low and emotional energy clamours for release.*

*Two main ways forward from this meeting were suggested:*

- 1. More staff community meetings so we might find out more about others and develop an identity together.*
- 2. Open management meetings where visitors might observe - for a part of the management meeting at least.*

*More joint activities between managers and staff were also seen to be necessary, but the form this might take remained unclear.*

*In summary, the meeting started slowly, built up energy, I challenged others and they challenged me, the feedback appeared honest and open and there seemed to be quite a buzz when we parted.*

### ***THE MANAGEMENT MEETING (2-3.30)***

*This group was considerable smaller than the previous one, but there was a similar*

*initial sense of restrained distance. My first impression was of a socially polite, cautious and watchful group. As with the previous group individuals were articulate and bright but less open or spontaneous.*

*This group struck me as a very young one, not yet fully formed. Some members had recently “fought their way in” and others had “recently joined”. New members were experiencing difficulty in settling in. Anger, heated discussion and high motivation and commitment to the differing teams and disciplines generated a good deal of debate. I got the impression that this group was wrestling with national issues and doing a great deal of work beyond the organisational boundary and that its best work happened behind closed doors – out of sight of others.*

*Individuals in this group struck me as too quick to take responsibility and thus in danger of becoming over-committed. Though high motivation and commitment are sterling qualities for managers, these self-same qualities, when over-used, can stimulate burnout. When high levels of responsibility drive individuals, unnecessary guilt and self reproach may result when the standards set can not be reached. In this vein, the management group seems to shoulder responsibility for everything. I felt a degree of ‘work martyrdom’ flavoured the managerial culture. This was not a fun group to be in. People here were highly motivated towards their work, but appeared to rely on themselves rather than trusting to the support of others. This group seemed quick to blame itself rather than confront others; indeed, the group seemed to be conscientious to the degree of feeling responsible for things beyond their control, external to the organisation.*

*In summary, this group represented itself as a hard working and long suffering body who tended to function as individuals rather than as an interrelated whole. They appeared to be ruthlessly honest, aware of the differing cultures they represented and acknowledged their internal competition for resources. Upon hearing the Staff Group's feedback they received this openly and in an undefended way, yet I sensed they were a little hurt to be seen in the way suggested (...).*

#### **PLANNING GROUP (4 o/c-5 o/c)**

*We reviewed the day together. From the evidence it seemed those involved had valued the opportunity to express their feelings and contribute to future plans. It felt like the lid had been lifted off the organisational pot and that this had itself helped generate a sense of togetherness. Individuals observed that they had felt heard and attended to and that there was a need for more of this sort of activity to happen.*

*Though Management and Staff groups had met separately today, it was recognised that both groups needed to do something themselves to increase their sense of identity. In this light, it was suggested the Planning Group be used as a ‘cross cultural’ vehicle to represent all levels and views of staff.*

#### **A SUGGESTED WAY FORWARD**

*Re the Staff Group:*

*1. Open facilitated groups in the manner of today's meetings - every 4 - 6 weeks where people may express their views, diagnose what they need and learn more about one another.*

*This would not be team building so much as community building (...).*

*Re the Management Group:*

*A facilitated group where managers explore themselves, their relationships and mutual support systems, receive peer feedback, and float strategies as to the way ahead for the organisation. To be facilitated, initially, at three weekly or monthly intervals for the first 4 months, then less frequently as the group desired. In time the group would hopefully become self facilitating (...).*

*3. Individual managers who desire individual coaching or 'shadow consultancy' could also request this for specific events or occasions when needed. These one-to-one sessions would be with a facilitator other than myself and could be of 3-4 hours duration, such as before, during or after a staff meeting so as to receive quality feedback.*

*Note: the above facilitated groups may have a life of six-eighteen months depending upon the organisational need.*

*Re Joint Management and Staff Activities:*

*4. Training workshops on the following topics were suggested:-*

- Giving and Receiving Feedback;*
- Listening and Dealing with Feelings;*

*And later more intensive training in such as:*

- Understanding the Dynamics of Groups and Teams (...).*

*It is suggested that the above workshops be open to all staff, be of 3-5 days duration, be offered two or three times each so as to meet the staff demand, and could begin in September.*

*Informally, it was suggested that the following activities could start right away if staff had sufficient incentive:*

- Lunch-time 'sandwich' sessions where staff come together to share interests other than work, such as Spanish, Indian or Chinese cooking;*
- Picnics/frisbee sessions in the park;*
- Away days - in work time - where people may get to know each other socially?"*

Following the above 'Communications Day' I reflected further upon what I had met.

Although the picture the Planning Group had given was accurate enough, and it was in my brief to:

- "*foster effective organisational communication*";
- "*work with the various staff splits*";
- "*explore where feelings go in the organisation*" and
- "*explore ways feelings might be healthily expressed*".

I reasoned that the dynamics I had met did not develop in isolation, but were rather a response, and must therefore serve an organisational function or purpose; be this a healthy or pathological one. But what could this be?

I began to speculate upon the group or organisational needs that were being expressed or met through the organisational behaviours described. For instance, it seemed there was a need:

- 1) To express difference? (*As when a group feels in danger of being swamped or losing its sense of identity*).
- 2) To direct negative or competitive energies away from oneself or one's group? (*As in scapegoating when something is chosen to carry one's own evil or chaos and ritually sacrificed to purge forces that might otherwise break from control to harm the community*).
- 3) To make a political statement? (*As when a territorial dispute occurs and the drawing of a boundary is necessary*).
- 4) To express and release distress? (*As with the symptoms of disease which express and release toxic physical or emotional material while providing a clue to wider systemic distress*).
- 5) To vent frustration? (*As happens when we can't see the wood for the trees and are stuck in the same groove and feel doomed to repeat our mistakes over and over again*).
- 6) To feel more valued and live more meaningfully? (*As occurs in such as the so-called middle-age-crisis when we awake to wanting more from life or feel we have failed to reach our potential or to achieved our desires and destiny*).

Personally, reviewing the above options I began to suspect the organisation was in the process of 'expressing and releasing distress', aware of what was needed but stuck between 'awareness' and 'action' which accentuated the 'negative and competitive energies' already cursing through its field.

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### ***Reflections upon the Hidden Agenda:***

*X: Re-reading the report of the communications day reminds me of how careful or cautious we had become in the Management Team - certainly competing as to who worked the hardest, certainly defensive by habit, certainly this excessive feeling of responsibility, but so little energy and no creativity - probably due to the effort of keeping all those feelings in check!*

*The options coming out at the end of the communications day were not followed up. The weight of the financial crisis ensured that they were crushed through lack of*

resources. Then again, maybe the most important work had been done?

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#### iv) **The Part as a Mirror of the Whole**

*Perception is a mirror not a fact, a co-creation of your perceptive organs and your social learning. We only see what we have first come to conceive, and what we look upon is merely our state of mind reflected outward.*

(Late August to Early September) Three weeks later I am invited back to the Planning Group. I hear it has been decided to put my suggestions on-hold for the time being, as they wish to introduce me to the team where misuse of confidential material arose. I hear it was largely because of the plight of this team that organisational consultancy first fanned to life.

I am aware that I am being asked to begin another cycle of consultancy, a small scale team consultancy within an ongoing larger organisational consultancy. This realisation leaves me feeling that I am slipping back and beginning all over again! I decide to treat this as a separate act – as far as this is possible.

I wonder how and why this way forward has been chosen? The more so as it is not one of the options we previously discussed. I begin to indulge in imaginative speculation:

- *'Possibly they have been scared off by my fees?'*
- *'Perhaps they feel too much of what was previously hidden has now come to light?'*
- *'Possibly this team has become the scapegoat for "all organisational problems and discontents?'*
- *'Perhaps a new crisis has arisen in the team which demands rapid first aid?'*

So alerted, I decide to go with the flow and see what emerges.

My note that my approach and intentions at this time are generally consistent with that suggested by Egan (1994) of the shadow-consultant; i.e.

- *Do not become a cop, detective or spy;*
- *Be alert and inquisitive rather than suspicious;*
- *When you need to act, act decisively;*
- *Exercise prudence in condoning so-called minor infractions;*
- *Do not immediately try to formalise covert institution-enhancing arrangements (Egan 1994; p19-20).*

After several meetings with the team concerned I note some speculative impressions:

*'I wonder if team members competed to be the most hard working or committed, possibly as a way of gaining the manager's attention and favour? The expression of positive feelings such as celebration and praise seem as rare as the expression of negative feelings.'*

Again, I am struck by the larger organisation's management-staff dynamic being played out on a smaller stage. Interestingly, my work with the team, as with the organisation, was never

fully completed. It was as if the "Resolution phase" of working towards separation and meaningful ending, systemically and personally, could not be faced within this climate. There were obvious logical reasons - finance was short, but emotionally, change was seemingly being avoided and the loss associated with change - shunned. This team could not mourn? Bearing in mind Handy's (1993) portrayal of organisational culture ...

- *Power Culture: depends on a central power source with rays of influence spreading out from a Zeus-like figure who sits at the head of an organisation where "trust and empathy" are the basis for effectiveness.*

- *Role Culture: bureaucratically constructed, working by "logic and rationality" this culture is guided by Apollo the god of reason, and rests its strength in its pillars, functions and specialities.*

- *Task Culture: job or project related, the so-called "matrix organisation" where prime emphasis is placed upon "getting the job done", with individuals having a greater degree of control over their work; within this setting the god Athena, the warrior leader rules.*

- *Person Culture: where system and structure exist to serve individuals who mutually band together to better actualise their own careers and pursuits in an existential culture where Dionysus, the deity of the self-orientated individual rules.*

... I began to piece together my experience in a new light.

In general, the organisation as a whole seemed to draw pride from, and pay lip-service to, it being a client-centred "task culture", but in truth, appeared nearer to one of a "role culture". Cultural differences were also apparent in the various sub-groups.

The Planning Group, a composite of all other groups, seemed to have been propelled - and obligingly become a "task culture", a band of trouble shooters whose job it was to help and guide the rest through these troubled times. Their message seemed to be: "We do not particularly want to be here but someone has to take responsibility and do something".

The Staff Group, seemed to combine characteristics of "task culture" and "person culture" with expediency as the rule. So long as "tasks were done", work need not intrude nor subvert from the main delight of getting-on-with and enjoying life. This group's message appeared to be: "If the managers would just get on and manage the organisation and leave us alone life would be fine."

The Management group, in contrast, portrayed a "role culture" and were attempting to seemingly manage the organisation as if, it to, were a "role" inspired culture like themselves. Their message seemed to be: "We are responsible people doing the best we can for you in the circumstances please don't make any more pressure for us at the moment".

Sitting tight, often hidden behind closed doors, out-numbered and viewed as non-communicative by those outside, the Management Group appeared to be receiving a good deal of blame for present circumstances. Adopting the survival tactic of holding on to their anxieties, desensitising themselves and sticking to the rules, they appeared fearful and frozen like a group under siege. I sensed they needed help, but were unable to let their defences down long enough for outside support to come in. Their fragility appeared such that one more straw might break their back. No doubt they would wish to keep me - and all that I represented - out. But, if the organisation were to change, major interpersonal and awareness raising work would be needed, and they had run out of ideas.

Interestingly, the Staff group, Planning Group and Management Group all seemed to come from a position of powerlessness and want the Director to play the role of Zeus. True, in Zeus-like fashion she seemingly sat on her own mount Olympus - though in their midst, but here the similarity ended, for unlike Zeus she was not inclined to be influential nor play the power-game expected. She appeared more attuned to the call of Dionysus. Like the Staff Group, the director, at heart, just seemed to want to do her own thing and to have a peaceful self-directed life.

v) **Interrupted Endings and Unfulfilled Beginnings** (The Resolution Phase)

*Chaos demands to be met, recognised and experienced, we must enter into and make friends with chaos before it surrenders itself to a new order.*

(November) I am called back to a combined management-staff group by the Personnel Manager who has now become my main bridge and support within the organisation. Within this meeting the following themes hold sway:

- *Where are we now?*
- *Where are we going?*
- *What is the emerging future?*
- *What do we see when we look ahead?*
- *Setting ground rules for future discussions.*

This is scheduled to be a short meeting of 90 minutes, and feels a little like starting all over again. Planning rather than emotional agendas surface, and yet again, a sense of mystery pervades. There is obviously something big going on which can not be talked about. When I enquire, I am told there is re-organisation planned, but that this is still at the confidential stage. Bracketing-off this information we continue to action plan the way forward. The personnel officer summarises this meeting in a later letter:

*"Thank you for coming to the meeting ... I don't think we would have got very far without you there.*

*At the end of the meeting it was agreed that we would recommend to the Management Team that we have one further facilitated meeting with you, as a whole group, including managers. It would obviously not be compulsory that people attend, but very much encouraged. At this meeting we would need to set ground rules for future meetings..."*

Two weeks later I return for what is to be our last meeting together. I am now aware that finances are short and that nothing further is planned.

I hear there is much at shift in the organisation. The emerging need appears to be one of staff support, but because of financial restrictions, this will now be self facilitated.

I facilitate sharing in pairs, then in small groups - so as to enable and encourage everyone's interaction and consideration of: "where they are now", "what they have to give", and "what they want of others and the organisation for the future". At least here a partial ending is possible as people debrief, critically reflect on events and listen attentively to each

other.

I hear that the organisational cork has popped - no doubt abetted by the communications day? Discontent content with management and the Director is now no longer kept under wraps but is openly expressed. She for her part states "she feels her time is coming to an end." Possibly she feels more criticism is to come, or has decided enough-is-enough, for she leaves this meeting early; critique of the Director surfaces even more following her leaving.

Emotional energy today feels muted and sad - a realistic response bearing in mind the organisation's financial crisis and with the Director in transit. I guess this consultancy has taken the blinkers off. It feels like the collusions and delusions that originally held it together are starting to dissolve, but there is nothing to replace these yet, and a rather unpleasant sense of stuck-ness is coming to the fore. At least problems can no longer be avoided or denied, and now will have to be faced. But was the Director being scapegoated?

I voice my regret that no provision for ongoing external supervision or staff support has been arranged, but note there are skilled people within the organisation well able to grow in to the staff facilitator role - if others let them. I experience warmth in the goodbyes that individuals offer me as I leave.

As I walk to the station I review events. On the positive side, I am aware that the airways are open should people wish to stay in dialogue with each other, and note how previously distanced groups and individuals now speak to each other. On the negative side, I wonder should another crisis emerge, who else might be scapegoated to appease the gods? Will another team or person be thrown up to symbolically carry the blame? I also wonder if I have done enough for individuals to look within and to monitor themselves and their teams.

Travelling back by train I reason that having raised the organisational shadow - possibly it was fitting for me to be cast out. Hopefully, things will not return to their earlier 'normal' behaviours. My contracted job was to raise awareness and to generate communication, this I did. But, I still feel incomplete, as if leaving a half finished meal.

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### ***Reflections upon the Hidden Agenda:***

*X: In the weeks leading up to our last meeting with Paul we had had some very tense and strained management meetings. The financial crisis that had finally erupted meant that the group was looking for cuts. I had come back from holiday to be warned that two members of the Management Group were out to get my department closed; the atmosphere had deteriorated. The trustees were increasing the pressure on the management team as a whole and the managers had begun to withdraw their tacit support from the Director, leaving her increasingly exposed. For instance, papers she wrote for the board were not rewritten by managers - and were seen in all their inadequacy. Eventually, the Director announced she had intended to leave the organisation the following year, but would now bring this forward - to within the month.*

*It is probable that the open expressions of discontent and the clear picture of ill health that emerged contributed to the changes that followed:-*

*- the appointment of a new chief executive;*



- *an agreed mission; goals and objectives for the organisation;*
- *development of a new management structure.*

*It seemed to me that the most widespread feeling prior to consultancy was one of apathy - that it was not worth getting excited because nothing would come of it .There has been no opportunity for the final part of the story to be explored - and many negative feelings remain (...) maybe in allowing the consultancy to end we have done what we needed and as much as we could afford?*

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#### **vi) Subsequent Insights and Learning**

*Everyman takes the limits of his own field of vision as the limit of the world; to go further is to step knowingly into unknown territory.*

Reading X's responses I am reminded at how in-the-dark a consultant is at the beginning of consultancy, how much they rely on intuition and how careful they must be to work with 'what is' - rather than what they transfer in by way of theoretical models or interpretive bias.

Reviewing my performance I notice that within the phases of orientation, identification, exploration and resolution, my consultancy focus was subtly different. For instance, I found myself primarily 'Client-centred' during the Orientation phase - when I was building a working relationship; 'Problem-centred' during the Identification phase - when I sought to identify a strategy and an operational role; somewhat 'Strategy-centred' - during the Exploration phase as I began to implement and modify my interventions; and 'Quality-centred' - during the phase of Resolution when I attempted to evaluate the outcome. I have since come to believe that these differences hold true for coaching, consultancy, group facilitation and action research. They cement what I am aiming to do - 'the task', to the way I am doing it - 'the process'.

No doubt the organisation described above had once enjoyed a period of shining success and will enjoy the same again, though I was privy to a period of conflict and crisis. "Denial" was a primary causative agent here. People and organisations that function effectively know their limits and look to them for guidance; they do not shy away from the message a crisis brings.

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#### ***Reflections upon the Hidden Agenda:***

A person, team, or organisation's limitations need to be understood and assimilated if they are to stay healthy. When limitations are denied, as in the aforementioned case, egotism and hubris are fuelled, managers kill the messenger and adopt the moral high-ground (O'Neil1991); consequently, the organisation ceases to question itself and stops learning.

*"Our life in the world comes to us in the shape of time. Consequently, our expectation is both a creative and constructive force. If you expect*

*to find nothing within yourself but the repressed, abandoned and shameful elements of your past, or a haunted hunger, all you will find is emptiness and desperation. If you do not bring the kind eye of creative expectation to your inner world, you will never find anything there. The way you look at things is the most powerful force in shaping your life. In a vital sense, perception is reality" (O'Donohue 1997 p138).*

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