

Unleashing the potential (b)locked in negativity

Abstract

“This won’t work; we’ve tried it all before, and it hasn’t worked; we’re doing fine, why bother with new approaches ...”

Whenever people complain, blame or moan, they express – however unproductively – their inner pain because some of their deep-felt values have been violated. By helping individuals or teams unearth the positive motivators (qualities, values, needs) that drive their negative responses, and bringing them to the table in a constructive manner, the awareness that has arisen in the process can be mobilised for finding fresh alternatives on how to create solutions that include diverse qualities/values/needs present.

The process offers a fresh perspective on the potential of negativity in the workplace. Combined with the communication skills needed (such as appreciative attitude, listening, empathy, dialogue), it can be a powerful tool for turning conflict into collaboration at any stage of innovation process.

Key words

Collaboration, innovation, conflict, facilitation, values, strengths, empathy, compassion, dialogue

Introduction

Innovation processes is rarely a solo affair. If not already in the creation of an idea, then others are included in developing the idea for invention, as well as in bringing it to potential financiers and consumers. The more complex the challenges are, the greater the need for collaboration which brings together various skills – from research to innovation to marketing to selling.

The process is however rarely linear: breakthrough ideas often encounter negative feedback, which can impede or halt idea development process.

Group process facilitators working in Slovenia report higher resistance to change in comparison to similar Anglo-Saxon settings (Novak, 2007). This resistance can take the form of lamenting over the past with the focus on what went wrong; suspicion of new approaches; fear of failure; reluctance to form action plans and assign responsibilities. During the innovation process, it is often manifested as resistance to new ideas.

Cross-cultural research also attests to cultural differences regarding openness to change. One of the cross-cultural dimensions related to this phenomenon is uncertainty avoidance, which Hofstede (2005: 167) defines as the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations. In the work environment, it is marked by resistance to innovation, preference for taking known risks, and higher resistance to changes (Hofstede, 2001: 160, 170). On the Uncertainty Avoidance Index (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005), Slovenia ranks no 15 among 74 researched countries, while for example the U.S.A, UK, Canada and Australia all rank in the lowest third of the countries surveyed.

The challenge

Huge amounts of time and energy in the workplace are invested into criticising, complaining and resisting. The challenge is not to ignore the existence of negativity, or diminish its significance – but to mobilise the human energy that has been invested into it for positive change.

This article aims at sharing a process that has proved instrumental in harnessing the energy invested into negativity, and transforming it into a source of inspiration in collaborative settings.

The approach

This article argues that behind each passionate criticism, complaint or resistance to an idea, there is an underlying value/quality /need which is valuable to the person criticising, and which is perceived to be threatened by that idea. When the person criticising is encouraged to connect with what is precious to them, ‘the liberation of power’ happens (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008: 26). Positive emotions arise, which help people connect with the larger whole, increase feelings of solidarity with others, and transform learned helplessness into learned helpfulness (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008: 11-12). This results in social helpfulness, which paves the way for group collaboration.

The process

Let us imagine a group effort to generate new ideas on an issue that matters to all of them. Person A proposes an idea, which is met with resistance by person B.

STEP 1: Venting the frustrations

The facilitator invites person B to express their concerns as directly as possible. Person B could say: »This is a stupid idea!« or »I just know that this won't work!« or »We've got no resources for that« or »There won't be any market for it«.

STEP 2: Helping surface unmet needs/qualities/values

After hearing each of the judgments, the facilitator helps person B identify positive motivators behind the judgment expressed. This can be done in three steps:

- help surface and articulate the underlying values/qualities/needs that person B perceives will be unmet if pursuing the proposed idea;
- if needed, help translate the judgments into qualities/values/needs underneath – always checking with person B for accuracy;
- express genuine empathy (devoid of any judgment) for the value/quality/need surfaced – connect on a human-to-human basis.

The positive motivators discovered in our case might be: product quality, employee work/life balance, fairness, sensible allocation of resource, efficiency, clarity, meaning/sense ...

STEP 3: Helping others hear the needs behind negative responses

Paraphrasing is usually used here. Other participants are asked to share what they have understood – which values/qualities/needs person B wants to be considered. Person B reports back whether understanding has been reached; if not, then the process is repeated. The checking for understanding is repeated not only till the right words have been reiterated – but until genuine compassion and trust emerge in the group. This moment is usually transformative.

STEP 4: Co-creation of solutions

From there, collaboration can start to happen: solutions be created to meet everybody's concerns. The issues that have emerged in the process – but are not directly connected to the goal of the session - can be put on a separate list, to be revisited in relevant contexts in the future.

This process can be applied:

- at any point of a collaborative innovation process where conflict arises, and appears to sabotage further process (be it idea generation, idea selection, action planning or any other phase),
- when the team is stuck, and pessimistic perspectives prevail,
- whenever dialogue is needed to arrive at quality decisions for complex issues.

Critical points in the process

Although the process presented may appear straightforward and simple, there are a number of conditions that need to be present. First of all, the process requires a facilitator who is passionate about, and well-versed in, strength-based approaches, which build on identifying and developing strengths in individuals, teams or organisations - rather than on analysing deficiencies. Some examples of strength-based approaches include appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), solution-focus consulting (Jackson & McKergow, 2007), strength-based leadership (Rath & Conchie, 2009).

The facilitator also needs excellent empathy, listening and articulation skills, such as proposed by the nonviolent communication model (Rosenberg, 2005) and dialogue approach (Elinor & Gerard, 1998; Issacs, 1999).

Summary

By helping individuals or teams surface the positive motivators (qualities, values, needs) that drive their negative responses, and bringing them to the table in a constructive manner, several windows of opportunity open:

- individuals internally connect with this quality, which results in a higher-level awareness, energy and perspective,
- sharing this quality, they connect to each other on human-to human basis, which helps release the tension in the group, thus enabling collaboration,
- the energy that has arisen (on individual and team level) can be mobilised for finding fresh alternatives on how to create solutions that meet diverse qualities/values/needs surfaced in the process.

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