FLASH POINT – dealing with organisational conflict

Some voluntary agencies have exemplary working environments, others are fraught with misunderstandings and political in-fighting. How is it that in some organisations people can demonstrate immense compassion and social awareness to their service users, but not towards their colleagues? In short, what can make some workplaces a living hell, and what do you have to do to create a supportive office environment? This article uses a case study to illustrate some of the issues that are at stake in managing voluntary agencies.

Front Door

Denise had worked in various management posts in the NHS for almost a decade and felt utterly burnt out by the bureaucratic procedures which kept her from meaningful work with patients. She wanted to support a voluntary sector organisation that could really make a difference in people's lives, so she was thrilled to be appointed as chairperson of Front Door, a charity "supporting young homeless people to support themselves".

Once in role she was dismayed to discover that the charity's director and staff were permanently aggrieved about some or other issue, and she found herself sucked into taking care of them. It seemed petty, but she also noticed that trustees, staff, and volunteers constantly cadged small things off her when she visited the office, like cigarettes or change for the parking meter, without reciprocating, and they regularly borrowed pens without returning them. At the same time they also appeared to be terribly territorial about their own possessions. She began to feel resentful.

Things reached a head on a particularly frenetic day. She dropped into the office for a scheduled briefing from David, a senior manager. He was engaged on a long 'phone call, so she grabbed the memo-pad off his desk to write him a note. He leaped up, snatched the pad back and yelled a torrent of abuse at her. Another staff member, Chris, who was passing at the time, joined in: "Get off our patch!". Other staff in the office started a slow clap in support. Denise retreated hastily, badly shaken and utterly bewildered that they could treat their chairperson so disrespectfully.

Making Sense of the Nightmare

So what was going on between Denise and the staff? A powerful phenomenon in institutions working with traumatised clients is that this trauma is sometimes mirrored in the behaviour of employees. In this case, staff relations at Front Door reflected the distressing experiences of their young homeless clients who had to fight for their very survival, fiercely defending their most meagre possessions and begging for small change just to be able to eat.

In a similar way, staff (and, to a lesser extent, volunteers and trustees) at Front Door were over-identified with their clients' experiences: assuming their lives were on the line, and demonstrating the same mixture of aggression and utter helplessness. Denise realised that she had been drawn into the drama too, unconsciously "social working" staff, breaching their personal space by grabbing items off their desks, and pandering to their "begging" by lending small items which were never returned. She knew that to get Front Door back on line and to reassert her professional authority she would have to work with the chief executive to establish clear role boundaries across the organisation, and to support staff to deal with the distressing context in which they worked.

Group Tensions

Denise's experience illustrates some of the "acting out" that can take place when a staff group is struggling with uncontained anxiety:

- Fight or flight – feelings of being persecuted by someone whom the group attacks or retreats from. (In this case it was Denise, the chairperson, though it could be the board of trustees, the director, another manager, a colleague, or an external person, such as a funder)
- Dependency – helpless reliance on an omnipotent leader, not necessarily a leader who is liked. This is probably what was happening when Denise found herself "social working" staff.
- Pairing – Looking to the pairing of particular group members to produce something powerful, as happened when Chris and David yelled at Denise and the rest of the staff applauded. (Bion, referenced in de Board, 1978)

The challenge for organisational leaders is to contain this emotional anxiety and to support colleagues to focus on rational work tasks. But how do you do it?

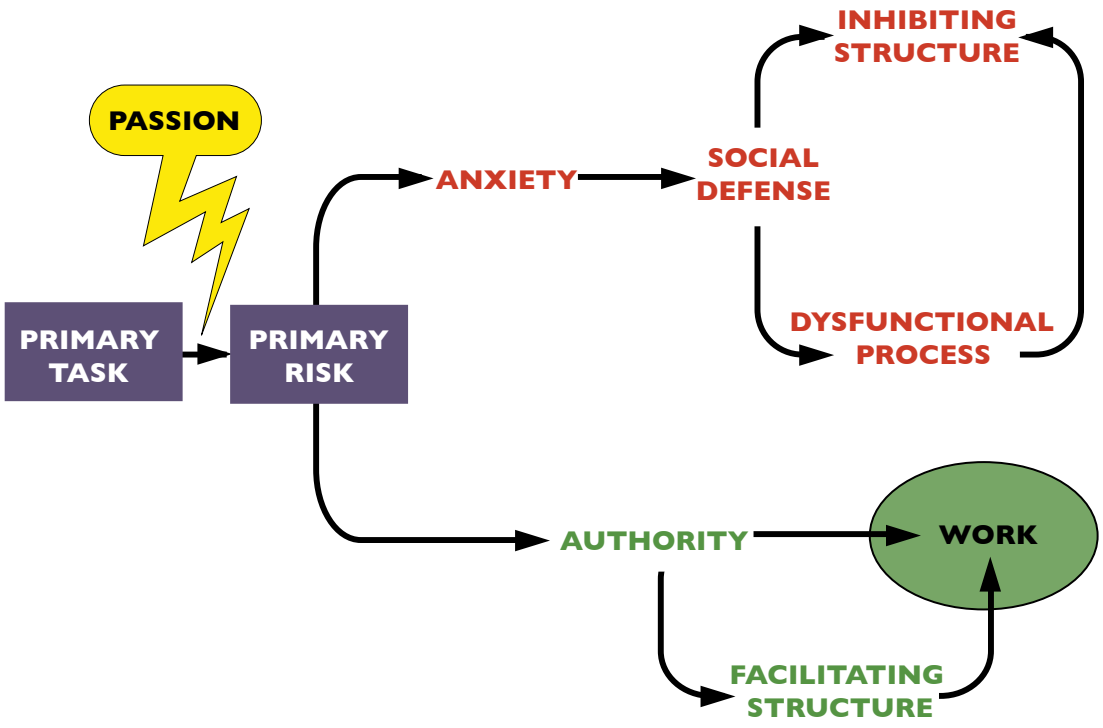
Organisational Dynamics

Larry Hirschhorn has developed a helpful structure for understanding and shifting organisational dynamics, illustrated in figure 1. At the heart of an organisation is its primary task which also entails a primary risk. People approach their working environment with a sense of passion, but if the associated risks of the job are not managed, an inhibiting structure is set in motion: passion turns to anxiety which triggers a self-perpetuating cycle of social defence, and dysfunctional process. Managers must exert appropriate authority to manage the risks of the job and thereby provide a facilitating structure which channels energy into effective work activities.

This can be applied to the immensely distressing circumstances for staff in care agencies. People working at Front Door witnessed filth, squalor, violence, chaotic drug use and exploitative sexual relations. They experienced guilt and shame about "building a career out of other people's suffering", and, at the same time, worried that each young homeless person not receiving their support could be exposed to lethal dangers on the street. Denise discovered that there were no facilitating structures to help staff to engage meaningfully in managing the complex risks associated with their difficult workplace tasks. Instead an inhibiting structure had evolved in which staff bought into the idea that life is a rat-race where nobody can be trusted, which in turn reinforced their mutual distrust and heightened their intolerable feelings of isolation and helplessness. To counter their helplessness and guilt they resorted to omnipotent fantasies - setting themselves impossibly ambitious outreach targets, and then blaming each other when they failed to fulfil their quotas.

Recovery

Denise and the Chief Executive enlisted my consultancy, part of which entailed devising support structures for staff. This enabled staff to modify the severity of their omnipotent / impotent swings by reconciling themselves to the deep ambivalence that they felt about their work, and recognising the limitations and strengths in themselves and each other. Initially the support for staff concentrated on providing a forum to communicate and rebuild trust with colleagues, and talk about the distress that they felt when they were unable to rehabilitate every client.



With time a working party was convened to benchmark Front Door's outreach targets against those for similar agencies. Denise held her breath when the working party actually recommended lowering the agency's targets, but when this was implemented she was amazed to see a significant increase in the quality of client contact, and a transformation in the way staff related to each other – and to her. Through the working group staff were able to humanise themselves by relinquishing their feelings of omnipotence and impotence and lowering their targets in order to provide a better service to those clients that they did see. The crux of their crisis was that they were unable to engage with the primary risk: that they could try to help as many clients as humanly possible at the technical risk of providing a bad service, or they could provide a better service at the moral risk of not being able to help everyone. Without support they could not make this choice, and so by default they chose to help everyone whilst all the while resenting the choice. Their acting out was a direct consequence of their failure to take a primary risk.

Conclusions

Organisational management is hard because traditional authority can no longer be taken for granted. In all sectors leaders are finding that they cannot rely on their formal status as directors, trustees or senior managers. Their authority has to be earned, particularly in the voluntary sector where there greater questioning of the status quo. Leaders of charities have to demonstrate to their staff and volunteers that authority can be applied positively - to hold the organisation and contain anxiety - and not just punitively or for self-gain.

It is essential for organisational leaders to pay as much attention to maintaining the human dimension of their agencies as they pay to maintaining organisational systems and strategy. Where there are tensions it is worth acting swiftly to resolve them, if necessary drawing on outside expertise from consultants, mentors or umbrella agencies to break internal deadlock and find creative solutions to difficulties.

Diagnosis of organisational tensions should consider the primary risks associated with carrying out the agency's main tasks, and should investigate parallels between external client trauma and internal interpersonal dynamics. Solutions should focus on providing a facilitating structure to contain anxieties generated by the primary risks.

What does seem clear is that resources invested in maintaining high quality interpersonal relationships now more than pay for themselves in the future, by preventing expensive and acrimonious misunderstandings, and by directing maximum energy into the primary task of the organisation.

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The case study used here is based on fact, with details changed in the interests of confidentiality.

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