

TURNING RIVALRY AROUND

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1. Introduction

For organisations to maintain healthy workplace dynamics they need to pay attention to potential undercurrents of rivalry. Rivalry can arise unconsciously even within close working relationships, and can be highly destructive. On the other hand, if rivalry is well managed it can also be turned around to release fresh energy into the organisation.

2. NewStart – A Case Study

NewStart is a progressive drugs rehabilitation project working with 'difficult' people who have been refused treatment by other agencies. Nick, the new chief executive, previously ran a software company and knew little about rehabilitation, but worked his charm to secure developmental funding for a high-profile conference to promote the organisation's innovative services.

For this he recruited an external candidate, Henry, as Conference Organiser; in preference to Grace, the Projects Worker who had previously organised NewStart's conferences. She criticised Henry's proposed programme, and insisted on being conference chair; speaker; facilitator; and rapporteur.

Jane, the service user representative - a dynamic woman who had escaped a bitterly abusive lifestyle - was scheduled as opening speaker; and Nick invested a lot of time in coaching her for the event.

Then, with a few weeks to go before the conference, NewStart erupted: Grace announced that she had no time to prepare her keynote speech; Henry went over budget on a lavish location for the conference; service users held a vote of no confidence in Jane; and Jane threatened to denounce high staff salaries in her speech.

3. Introduction

Charities are under such pressure to tackle a myriad competing demands, that it is hard to find the time to invest in maintaining healthy workplace dynamics. Unconscious rivalry can arise, even within close working relationships, and can be highly destructive, though it can also be turned to release fresh energy into the organisation.

4. Types of Rivalry

Rivalry has 3 main forms: envy, jealousy and greed. The terminology sounds mediaeval, but the concepts touch on issues at the heart of contemporary management.

Envy is a furious desire to spoil the advantage that someone else has, particularly a personal quality like charisma or leadership. An envious person feels he could not achieve the same quality – that he cannot even allow himself to want it. What he envies is the fact that others have given themselves permission to develop.

Henry felt so envious of Nick's charisma that he "bit the hand that fed him", deliberately ignoring Nick's financial advice; while Nick was envious of Grace's close bonds with service users. Jane still felt insecure, unable to find work, and was envious that Grace and her colleagues took their salaries for granted.

Jealousy – is a furious attack on the interloper who threatens the security of an important attachment to a person or an object. Jealousy is driven by a lack of resourcefulness to secure alternative sources of fulfilment.

Grace was extremely jealous when Henry used her network of contacts, and when he got more supervision time from Nick.

Greed is an insatiable desire to accumulate more than anyone else has, without any regard for the people who are trampled along the way. Greed is more common in acquisitive organisations that reward individual rather than group successes.

Henry felt insecure about the conference, so he compensated by booking an unnecessarily luxurious venue, while Grace was determined to get her share of the limelight by taking over the programme.

5. Cycles of Rivalry

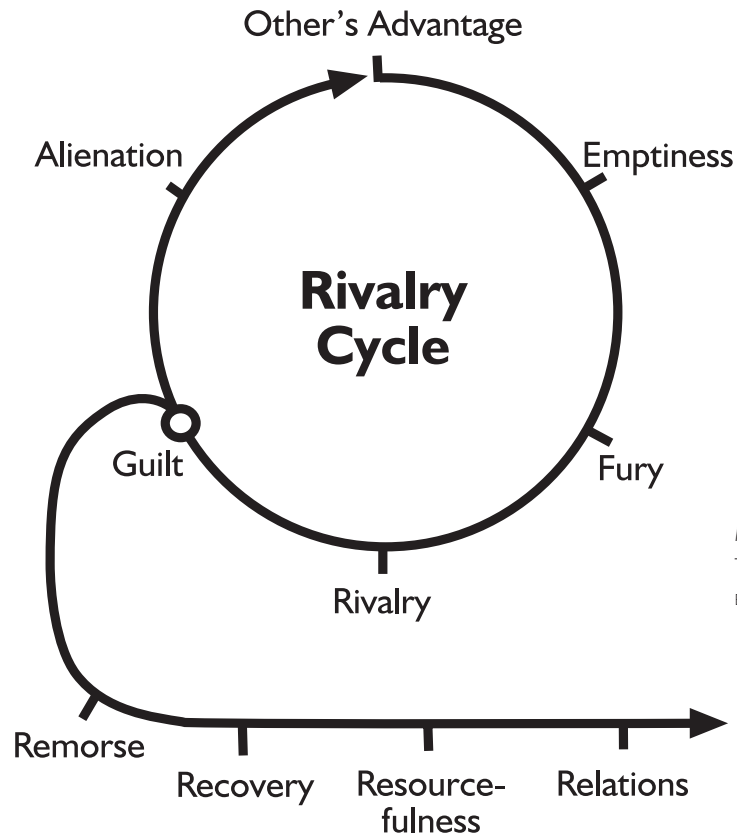


Figure 1
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We supported Nick and his colleagues to understand the destructive cycle that they were caught in. (see figure 1) They had become rivalrous through a failure to take pleasure in each other's achievements. They dreaded it when their peers had an advantage, and experienced this as a terrible emptiness. They became furious, acted out their rivalry, then felt guilty for the aggression, feared reprisal, and felt even greater emptiness.

We enabled the group to break the cycle by experiencing the 4 "R's":

- Feeling remorse about the damage they caused
- Recognising that their rivals had recovered from these attacks
- Developing their own resourcefulness to satisfy their own needs
- Establishing a sense of communal relations.

6. Rivalry & Inequity

Rivalry can also be grounded in an objective sense of betrayal when an organisation's systems for distributing resources and rewards are inequitable, or when discrimination takes place against particular social groups (in terms of race, gender, sexuality etc).

Organisations need to support people to express this sense of betrayal so that inequity can be challenged, otherwise unacknowledged distress can emerge as rivalrous attacks on those who appear to benefit from the unfair system.

7. Rivalry & Marginalised Communities

Rivalry also accounts for why it is so difficult to develop self-help structures for people who are severely marginalised by society. This is because people who come together out of a common experience of discrimination are in a catch-22 position: their communality is forged out of a need to find the courage to achieve their individual goals despite the social barriers that hold them back; yet if some individuals do break through these barriers, their success seems to undermine the foundation on which the group was forged.

This dynamic can cause group members to sabotage their successful peers in order to prevent them from abandoning the group. And successful peers can hold themselves back to avoid this hostility.

Jane had suffered more abuse than other service users, yet she was the one getting her life in order; while they still relied heavily on NewStart's support. When they heard that Jane was being groomed to open the conference, they felt ashamed of their failure, and launched an attack on her.

8. Permission to Advance

The bottom line with rivalry is that people need encouragement to allow themselves to 'advance'.

Through a series of exercises we supported NewStart personnel to:

(see Figure 2)

- Review their ambitions and differentiate their (pressing) needs from (less urgent) "wants".
- Identify circumstances blocking them from meeting their needs; relinquishing what cannot be changed and working with what can.
- Review their values to decide which are core to their personal ethics, and to determine what compromises they are willing to make.
- Identify opportunities to meet their goals, and
- Build a sense of community by encouraging their peers to do so too.

People who believe that they are allowed personal rewards as long as they are focused on the common task, are less likely to feel empty, are less inclined to attack others, and have more energy for their organisations

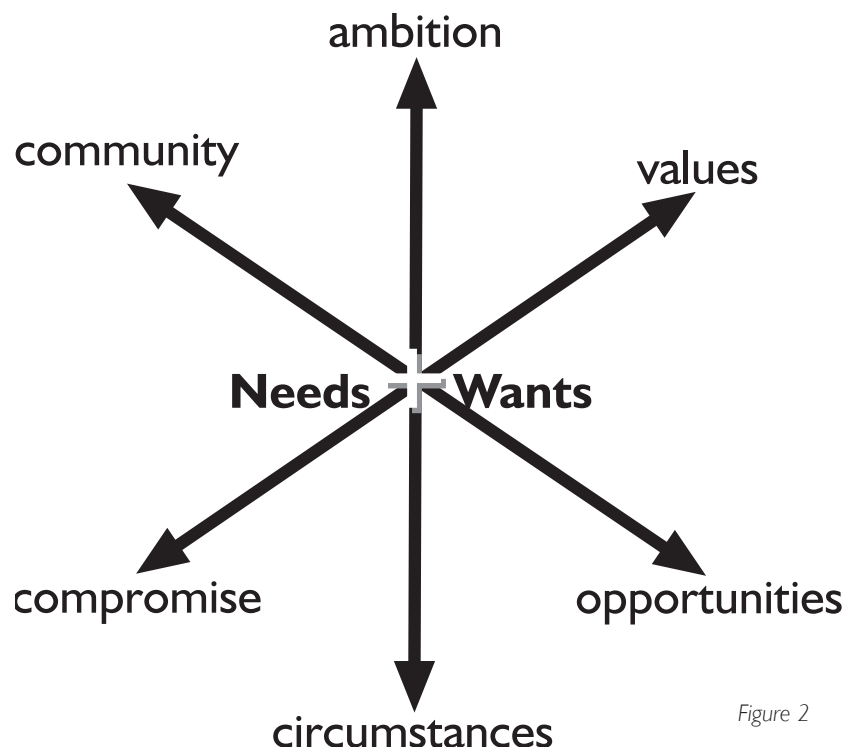


Figure 2

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9. Unlocking The Energy

- Accept that rivalry exists – work with it
- Hold your authority: don't retaliate.
- Point out rivalry when it happens
- Let rivalrous people experience the 4 "R's"
- Express and encourage gratitude
- Delegate effectively
- Support professional development
- Address wants, needs, values and compromises
- Celebrate difference and community
- Have equitable policies and procedures
- Support initiatives for social justice
- Raise awareness, especially in self-help groups
- Support people who are targets of envy
- Contain rivalry that won't go away
- If necessary, seek external support.

References

Eichenbaum, L & Orbach, S. 1987. Bittersweet: facing up to love, envy and competition in women's friendships. London: Century

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