Kari Murto

LEADING THE PROCESS

TOWARDS THE PROCESS CENTERED DEVELOPING OF WORK COMMUNITY
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2. DESIRE TO DEVELOP AND FEAR OF CHANGE

Most organizations and work communities wish to develop because things can always be better than they are at present. At a time of crisis the sole motivation for development can be the fear of a worsening situation and the need to preserve at least the level that has already been attained. The development of a community draws its strength from the contradiction/conflict between the present and the desired.

Examples of external contradictions:
– conflict between the goals and the present state of the community,
– conflict in external administration, for instance between elected officials and public servants in municipal administration or
– conflict between an external financier and the community administration.

Internal conflicts may concern the relationships between
– different hierarchical levels of the community
– different professional groups,
– cliques within the community or
– individuals.

Conflicts may arise from different interests, power struggles or differences of opinion, and they may concern for example goals, resources, working methods, work arrangements or human relations. If several kinds of conflicts start to pile up in a community, they will find themselves in a situation that can be called a crisis. It is typical for a crisis that you cannot get out of it with old means and methods.

If a company repeatedly misses its profit objectives, it may generate a conflict between the management and the workers of how to solve the situation. External administration, for example the board of directors or the trust, before long gets worried about the state of the company and offers its own methods to get over the difficulties. If they
fail to find a working solution, the financier is about to intervene.

When the situation has developed from a conflict into a crisis, the amount of alternatives to act will have diminished, and the financial, social and mental costs will rise.

The way how an organization or a work community can solve its internal conflicts and crises will determine whether or not it can attain its objectives. Solving internal conflicts can be hindered by the formation of cliques, or blaming the difficulty on another clique, department, the management or someone or something outside the organization. In that case you do not have to face the internal problems of the community or the organization. Resorting to this kind of a communal defence mechanism, where the scapegoat phenomenon also belongs, weakens and distorts communication in the community and leads to a worsening of the situation, ultimately to a crisis.

A survey on the top management of Finland’s state administration in the early 1980s showed that about every third representative of the top management considered that his field of activities was in an obvious crisis or poorly manageable. Then again the top management estimated that problems are manageable more often than did the ones working on lower levels of the organization. It was, however, worth noticing that the awareness of the crises did not lead to changing the adopted routines and working practices (Kivinen, 1986).

Quick and unpredictable social changes impose continuous change and development pressures on organizations and communities, and adapting to them is not easy. That is why it has become a popular development practice to produce development plans rather than to bring about concrete changes. This has been attained by simply shifting the responsibility of development to distinct units. The task of the unit is to produce development plans based on different kinds of surveys.

In their book on tarok leadership, Henri Broms and Ve sa Paavola (1991) equate the production of these kinds of plans and their handling in development meetings and seminars with ceremonies and rituals the task of which is
to strengthen the sense of security rather than to lead to the execution of plans. Often, fortunately or unfortunately for us, the development remains on paper without any perceivable changes in the daily actions. The ritual does, however, sustain an illusion of development.

Training is extensively used as a mode of development. In its traditional form it is well suited to be a reinforcement ceremony of the illusion of change. You can see the contradiction of change and preservation in the actual training occasion if you try to change the very occasion. On behalf of the impact of training, more important than what is being taught is how you learn. Thus you can learn more about the community and its process of change by examining the training situation together with the students than by lecturing about it.

I often start training by asking the participants how they feel and what they expect from the training. These are typical answers:

– I’m in a good and expecting mood,
– I expect something new, new thoughts, motivation to work, or
– I can’t say, let’s see what comes up.

These typical, vague expectations raise many questions. Are we dealing with indifference, passive adjustment, or lack of interest towards one’s own work or towards the training? Have the participants come to training against their free will? Or haven’t they learned to examine their own needs and to express them? An explanation can also be found in the role differentiation learned at school, where the teacher is active and chooses the methods and contents, and where the student is a passive receiver of knowledge with little chance to influence on the teaching or the schedules.

The traditional view of education and learning can also be seen in the sitting order: the students sit in lines one behind the other facing the teacher. The arrangement tells about a learning apprehension according to which the students have nothing useful to give each other. Everything worth hearing and learning comes from the teacher.

Sometimes I ask if the participants find the sitting ar-
arrangement good. Sometimes one of the participants brings up the issue. When we talk about it, opinions seem to be divided so that the ones who have gotten the back seats are satisfied and don’t want any changes, and the ones in the front speak for the change. They would consider small groups or a semicircle where they could see the others. I usually don’t take charge of the situation. Every now and then we end up with an altered sitting arrangement, but sometimes regardless of the discussion people stay in their original position.

Whatever the end result, I used the incident as learning material for communal dynamics. I ask the participants to describe what happened as if they were witnessing a crime. Who brought up the issue, how did the others react to that, who were in favor of it and who objected to it, who made the move from words to deeds, who changed his place and who stayed in his original place?

If the change remains on discussion level, we analyze it in the same way, and at the end we evaluate the process and the end result: Is the present sitting arrangement better than the original one? Would someone like to go back to the former arrangement? Is everyone satisfied now or would someone like to have an even better arrangement? Even if some participants weren’t completely satisfied with their places, they usually settle for a partial improvement of the situation without daring to propose further changes.

The process can altogether take from half an hour to half a day. But it does offer a concrete common experience of the process of change with all its nuances of the idea, planning, realization, resistance and evaluation. But it is just in the subjectivity of the experience and in confronting one’s own feelings and behavior on an open forum, where the risk lies. By risk I mean confronting strong emotions. They can make some participants angry or locked up, and distress others. To express one’s feeling openly is a good starting point for learning, but it takes time and skill to turn the experience to learning. I shall come back to these questions in the sections on leading a process and process centered development. It is just that
starting the training in a “different” way reveals the contradiction and scariness of the change process that concerns our daily lives.

When the world changes quickly and uncontrollably, people start to talk about control of change. The Finns were led to this word magic in the late 1980s by talks about controlled change of societal structures, which in the following decade quickly turned out to be an uncontrollable crisis. In organizations and communities, even on the government level, people have insisted on having strong leaders to control the change. Consults with their divers development models have offered to act as guides.

To bring about change is easiest when everyone profits relatively quickly from the change. At the moment development and changes of the private as well as the public sector are carried out with diminishing resources. Giving up acquired benefits as far as being threatened lose one’s job naturally causes strong resistance. Antti Karisto (1992) states that the cutting phase requires far more careful planning than the growth phase. About the social sector he writes:

"Now it is time to think about the whole and to analyze the welfare effects of the cutbacks, for otherwise they will strike those areas where they are technically easiest to perform or where the resistance is weakest.” (Karisto, 1992, 15)

In decision-making to think about the whole and to analyze the effects requires cooperation and personal interaction between the decision-makers and the ones that will be affected by the decisions. Otherwise the overall view will remain imperfect and the knowledge of the effects of changes superficial. Development of societal institutions and organizations as well as the private sector need new kinds of models for organization and community development and cooperation.