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KETS DE VRIES INSTITUTE

THE VIEW FROM A BATHYSCAPH:

EXPLORING BENEATH THE SURFACE OF THE ORGANISATIONAL SEA

MEETINGS: WE ARE BUT PLAYERS IN THEM

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The Elephant in the Room. Julien Baillargeon. © 2017 KDVI Ltd

Continuing on from Part 1 - **Meetings: a matter of life or death***, here we reflect on group role identities and the way they can affect underlying dynamics in meetings.*

In one company we know of, a senior stakeholder told us about a meeting she had recently attended during which the chairman of a committee spent 45 minutes sharing a professional issue that had nothing to do with the group's agenda.

In yet another organisation we visited, so much time was spent in a board meeting discussing what wine to serve at a company function, that many critical strategic decisions had to be put off—and not for the first time.

The on-line Urban Dictionary says: "A meeting is where you talk about the work you would be doing if you were not in a meeting." But there may be, in fact, a great deal of working being accomplished by dysfunctional groups in meetings, albeit unrelated to the stated purpose of the gathering.

Let's imagine for a moment what might be happening in a typical meeting in which the group knows that they are not functioning well, but they cannot put a finger on the problem. In this imaginary meeting, the General Manager does most of the talking. A few people are overly anxious or need a lot of reassurance, and they take up more than their fair share of airtime with their issues. On the other hand, some people remain silent, hoping they won't be noticed or called on for input, as that might expose them as being unprepared or underperforming. Most manage to reach their own goal—to get attention or to remain invisible—but at what cost to the group's objective?

Many people stop listening. Some are concentrating only on what *they* want to say, and looking for an opening to jump in. Others don't see the relevance and are miles away thinking about something else entirely. Some may be listening intensely, but not to what the speaker is saying. Rather, they are gathering information by tapping into the group dynamics—scoping out who is who, who has the power, who is their best ally, who is weakest, and so on. What essential information is missed if group members are not fully invested?

The way personal energy is boosted or drained in the meeting is different for each individual. The extroverts in the room need an audience to re-energise and reconnect. They make discoveries by thinking out loud. For their needs, meetings are the perfect forum. The introverts, on the other hand, often find meetings very draining. They have already gathered information and thought it through carefully. They are ready to present their findings, but they wait for a break in the discussion that never comes. As excellent observers, they may be aware of group dynamics and other meta-issues. But does the group really want to deal with these issues?

In addition, groups tend to function by assigning identity roles to individuals—roles that are unrelated to professional job titles. Meetings are often influenced by out-of-awareness group dynamics in this way. Shakespeare's famous line from 'As You Like It', paraphrased above in the title of this blog, continues: "one man in his time plays many parts". Similarly, in meetings people typically find themselves in one of the following roles—roles that may well shift or change according to the fluctuating needs and objectives of the group. Here are some examples:

The *Leader*—who is often someone other than the person who officially holds the role—wants to gain or maintain control and primacy. Having a *Scapegoat* allows the group to displace guilt or anxiety into a specific "container." Being labeled the *Truthsayer* is a difficult task, as the person is often criticized for voicing the "undiscussables." Similarly, a group in difficulty might look for a

Stirrer—the person who will just not leave well enough alone. The *Guardian of Ethics* role may fall on a person who has a very strong sense of values—this person might be good at winding the Stirrer or Truthsayer up, and rallying him or her to the cause. The *Risk Taker* can be a glamorous role linked to innovation, particularly when there is a Scapegoat on whom to shift the blame for mistakes, and a *Skeptic* to keep the Risk Taker from getting out of hand. The *Nerd* is the go-to person for facts to support one's own opinion. Then there is the *Temperamental Child*.

This essential role captures and acts out the emotions of the group. The group may then exclude the Child as a way of avoiding the very real undercurrents in the room. There may also be a *Golden Boy* (who could be a woman) or *Savior* upon whom all hopes are pinned. The *Nurse* and the *Optimist* work hard to sooth and cheer people up—sometimes steering the group away from the deeply engrained issues that the Stirrer and the Temperamental Child may be embodying. There may well be a *Pillar* in the group—the workhorse who knows everything and can do anything.

To add to the complexity, the group may impose several roles on one individual. The head of IT in one company we worked with was clearly the Pillar, the Nerd, and the Scapegoat all at the same time. In another company where the chairman was a rigid traditionalist, the CFO—a natural Guardian of Ethics—was pushed into the Risk Taker role. He was the only person on the board who dared to challenge the chairman to consider strategic change.

In some cases, the identity roles described above play out and the group manages them effectively. For example, the group may take the Stirrer's concerns very seriously, and discuss them openly. The group could get the best out of the Golden Boy without falling into a position of dependency on his (or her) bright ideas.

Conversely, a dysfunctional team may become caught up in a whirl of strong but undeclared emotions, such as hate, love, anger, guilt or depression—and as a result, some of the roles described above may be subconsciously used by the group to act out or attempt to resolve these themes.

People are rarely aware of these roles, although they may feel the effects deeply, particularly in meetings, which provide an ideal forum for the group to reaffirm role identification.

Indeed, imposed role identification may exacerbate the factors that cause people to become anxious or disengage in meetings, and may even cause a person to burn out or leave an organisation. But the more things change, the more they remain the same: if the group needs that role to accomplish its underlying objective, it may attack or exclude the individual who resists taking it on. Then the group will put someone else in the role.

What can be done?

Be aware of your own behavior and take responsibility for your own needs.

— Do you seek reassurance or an audience? How does this affect your behavior in a meeting?
— If your mind wanders, check back in and intervene to make the meeting more efficient.
— Introverts, speak up and let the group know if your attention is wandering. This might help the group realize that the meeting is drifting off topic or lacks clarity.
— Extroverts, be sure that you don't spend too much meeting time thinking out loud or charging your individual energy batteries.

Be on the lookout for group role identities and repeated patterns of behavior.

— Think about the roles people are playing. Are these roles being used by the group in a healthy way? Or is the situation becoming dysfunctional? Has the group created a Scapegoat? Is that person really to blame? Is a Temperamental Child trying to voice an inconvenient collective emotion?
— Do you feel you have been labeled with a group identity role? Voice this to the group and explore what this might mean. What is the group trying to say—through you—about its own functioning?

We would like to hear from you. Share any thoughts triggered by the following questions.

Tell us about a time when you experienced a group that seemed to have created some of the group identity roles described above in meetings.

How does it feel to be in an identity role—when is it positive, and when might it become dysfunctional for you or for the group?

How could you intervene when the role dynamics become dysfunctional? How could they be shifted or reassigned?

Thinking about bringing a new group together, how might you explicitly work with group identity roles in an effective way?