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From Frustration to Cooperation

Background

To respond to the needs of the local community, a municipality needed to renew one of its libraries and build a new sports centre. The solution was a very innovative hybrid between a library, sports centre and auditorium. It served the citizens, the primary school next door and the local high school too. The opening of this new hybrid, however, was accompanied by certain problems. Because the library had expanded its users, it meant that the focus had shifted: now it also included educational literature aimed at the local primary school and high school. The library succeeded beyond all expectations because a lot of the sports centre members soon started to hang out there before and after training to make use of the library facilities too. In addition, the new range of literature events and other activities for kids and adults attracted more people than expected.

The former main library users, who were mostly elderly, now complained about a lack of service (in comparison to what they were used to) and especially about noisy pupils and students invading the library, and events that were not of interest to them.

Measured by how many local citizens were using the facilities, there is no doubt the opening was a huge success, but this success created some challenges for the librarians and the caretakers of the building. The unexpectedly large number of users called for good, effective infrastructure to handle the daily routines of managing the building and the library. Soon it also became clear that the natural wear and tear on the facilities was happening much faster than anticipated, again because of all the users.

This situation led to more and more discontent amongst librarians and caretakers, who disagreed about the division of responsibilities.

It made it even more difficult for the two groups to cooperate because the decision-making managers for the librarians and caretakers were

in physically different locations in the municipality. This caused communication procedures and decisions to be slow, adding to the growing frustration. A simple question, such as who was responsible for setting up chairs at an event in the library, could take days to clear. Both groups had to contact their managers, who then had to get in touch and subsequently communicate back what they had agreed upon. It transpired that these practical issues concerning cooperation and formal procedures of decision-making had not been planned and settled before the facility was opened to the public.

The job

Since the municipality didn't have prior experience with the constellation of a library, auditorium and sports centre in one building, they decided to give it extra attention by calling in an external consultant to work with the two groups.

I was asked by the Department of Culture & Leisure to intervene in the growing dispute between the librarians and caretakers by creating a constructive solution for their working relations.

At the first meeting with the Department of Culture & Leisure I was told that I was facing huge frustration from both groups (neither of whom were present at that meeting). It was made clear that the complaints about the library (some made in public via letters to the city mayor and in local papers) were not to be a part of my job. Still, it was important that I should also support the librarians in finding ways of coping with the negative reactions and public comments they were receiving.

The process

What I designed as a process was the following:

1. Preliminary meeting with each group - 1 1/2 hours. Purpose:

- to meet the groups separately and hear in their own words what they find important concerning cooperation and, in the case of librarians, how to cope with the negative pressure from the elderly user group.
- to get input in planning the joint workshop.
- to start an awareness of “what is optimal cooperation and what does it look like” between the groups.

Joint workshop - 4 hours. Purpose:

- to let caretakers and librarians jointly develop a set of criteria and procedures for good cooperation.
- to develop small concrete projects i.e. procedures, meetings etc. that can be tested and provide experiences in terms of cooperation.
- to strengthen the relations between the groups through developing common projects.

Follow-up meeting - 30-60 minutes. Purpose:

- to support their progress.
- to check in on success stories.
- to examine the need for further intervention from my side.

Preliminary meeting

Before this meeting I invited each group, by e-mail, to make observations on what was working well in their daily life at work. The email was sent two weeks prior to the meeting.

The invitation read as follows:

Dear X,

As a small warm up for our first meeting I would like to ask you to do an observation task. You can decide for yourself whether you want to write your observations down or keep them in your head until we meet.

The intention is to create awareness of what is working well in your daily work.

This is how to make your observations:

Choose two (preferably random) working days before we meet.

On these days your task is to notice things that happen during the day that either you or others do; things that you consider so important that they must never be forgotten or changed.

It can be whatever you find important, for example working procedures, meetings, colleagues and visitors, breaks, projects, events and so on.

At our meeting we will share your observations as far as is useful for you.

Yours sincerely,
Jesper H Christiansen

At the meeting people shared their observations. As I had hoped for, my email had led to conversations between most of the participants prior to the meeting. My intention was to warm them up and create a focus on the outcome of the process.

An important goal for me was to let them experience, through their own observations, what was actually working well despite the lack of good cooperation. This also helped me in the facilitation of the meeting, to

constructively take care of frustrations, and to strengthen the optimism that something could be done about the problems.

Another positive result of the preliminary meeting was to distinguish between wishes for change relating to cooperation with the other group and wishes for change within each group respectively. The latter contained wishes for a certain working culture and daily procedures.

Both the librarians and the caretakers felt as if they were under strong pressure from both the outside as well as in their internal cooperation, and within this meeting there was room for them to feel safe and speak up separately.

I needed to make it clear that it was up to them to bring to the workshop whatever topics were important to them. I would take care of the process design and ensure that they could include their topics in a constructive way. This was also to emphasize that all desired changes would have to come from them and would need to be carried out by them, one way or another.

Helpful questions for the preliminary meetings

- What do your observations say about what you do really well (as a librarian, as a caretaker)?
- what else?
- Now, you are under quite some pressure at the moment, and yet you manage to carry on your daily business. What have you observed that shows you how you are able to do so, despite the circumstances?
- what else?
- Of course, the other group (the librarians or the caretakers) has to change in order to cooperate better with you, so please tell me: what will you do differently, and even better, so that you do your best in this cooperation?
- what positive effects will that have:
- on the users?
- on the other group?

Joint workshop

The workshop consisted of three basic steps:

1. Future flashback
2. What works already
- 3 .Next steps

1. Future flashback

After welcoming everyone and setting the stage, the first step in the workshop was to shift the scenario from here and now to a preferred future state. The questions in this phase invited people to have a look at specific situations in their work, making detailed descriptions of how exactly things would be done differently for the better. The focus was mainly on actions, procedures and communication rather than on individual people.

Having this kind of conversation helped to build new relations between the workers. From *“Who does what wrong and has to change their behaviour?”* to *“What would we like to see done differently and what will the benefit of that be?”*

We enhanced the attraction of making changes by discussing in detail all the aspects that could make work easier, faster, more fun, simpler (or more challenging, complex) and so on.

The invitation to talk about a preferred future looked like this:

Imagine for a moment that cooperation is no longer a challenging topic. Forget all about how to get there (just for a short while) and imagine a good day where everything happens exactly the way you want it:

- What characterises such a good day?
 - what else?
- What happens where and when?
 - what else?

The outcome was a list of actions written on a flip chart to make it visible for everyone and remind them of what they were talking about.

2. What happens already?

The conversations about a preferred future (or several futures) formed the basis of the second phase of the workshop. This phase focused on where it was possible to link present situations to the preferred future scenarios described. The process goal of this phase was for the participants to be able to see what was already working right now, in order to inspire optimism and hope, and to develop new joint ideas.

Further questions were:

- What is already working well today that reminds us (maybe just a tiny-little-bit) of the future we have been talking about?
- What can we easily do more of, or differently, that will move us in the direction of the future we have been talking about?
- How can you support that?
- How can we together support that?

Linking to the present situation of what was already working broadened their thinking about the kinds of actions that could be taken. It showed the librarians and caretakers that something was already going on that could be amplified or adjusted, or rather they showed each other what they were doing already that supported cooperation between them.

3. Next steps

The final phase was to focus on practical next steps, possible action plans and other things the two groups found important, in order to move on towards the preferred future.

They made concrete agreements to carry out both existing procedures that already seemed to be working, and to try out new procedures. To put projects and next steps into perspective, the following questions were introduced:

- If this goes well (and it will because you have planned it):
- How will the users benefit from what you do?
- How will your managers benefit from what you do?
- What kinds of reactions will you get from these two groups that tell you, you are doing the right thing?

The follow-up

After the joint workshop there was one follow up session with each group separately.

Librarians

The follow-up session was a part of their weekly team meeting. In response to my question: “*So what is better?*”, they explained that not everything had gone according to plan, since they hadn’t had time to give it their full attention. This being very reasonable, I asked them again: “*So..... what is just a little bit better?*”

This opened up stories about small changes, things they found easy to do and had simply done... How they had changed procedures when hosting events, which had made it easier to communicate with the caretakers... and how they had started sharing stories about elderly users who reacted positively to their events and other initiatives, changing the negative experience with their previous users.

In this session it was important for me to focus not only on how they had translated conversations into accomplishments back in their daily work following the workshop, but also what was happening here and now. This was to avoid talking about what had not happened (negative focus) and instead focus on new ideas (positive focus).

For example, the idea arose to share stories about positive feedback from the group of users they had previously experienced as extremely demanding. This was not planned during the workshop, but came out of one of the conversations at the workshop about helping each other to focus on positive stories.

Caretakers

My meeting with the caretakers took only 15 minutes, of which five were the time it took them to explain to me that this conversation wasn't necessary at all. After all, everything had now been planned in the workshop, and if anything didn't go the way they wanted, the deal was to change it for the better. The remaining ten minutes I asked them about their confidence in their progress.

Again I got stories about working procedures that had been changed for the better and new ideas that they were going to try out with the library.

Well, if they didn't see any reason to talk to me, I just had to check that I wasn't needed. Asking questions about confidence helped me to hear what it was that made them sure that carrying on would continue to move them in the right direction.

Helpful questions for follow-up sessions

- what is better?
- What else?
- what would other people around you (colleagues, users) say is better?
- what next steps come to mind right now?
- What else?
- what makes you confident that this process will continue in a satisfactory way?
- What else?

Job done?

I contacted the Department of Culture & Leisure, the two responsible managers and the daily managers, and explained to them what I had experienced in the follow-up sessions. With that, I considered my job done. At the same time I invited them to contact me in case further intervention was needed.

Did the Department of Culture & Leisure hear the workers' positive stories? I never got to know. Well, I happened to run into one of the people

from the very first meeting, and he couldn't really remember that there were any problems between the librarians and the caretakers out there. I take that as a "yes".

What else made me confident that I intervened in a way that somehow benefitted the parties involved? In the follow-up sessions I noticed that the librarians and caretakers:

- were focused on trying out new things.
- were communicating with each other not only in a formal way, through a weekly meeting, but also informally, individually and in smaller groups.

I heard stories about ideas and projects that emerged when people met in coffee breaks, in the hallways or when someone got an idea and then simply contacted another person directly.

These stories showed me people with a high capability of:

- self organising.
- being responsible for their own actions.
- taking initiatives.
- learning from and sharing experiences.

These signs gave me confidence that they would proceed in a way that would serve their needs.

Helpful questions to ask yourself when considering withdrawing from a process

- What makes you confident that your clients can continue on their own?
- What have you specifically noticed that supports this confidence?
- What are your clients doing differently now compared to when you met them the first time?
- What have others around your clients told you that gives you confidence?

The end: what if...

What if...

What if I was about to do the same job today with the knowledge and experience that I have now? What would I do differently or keep the same?

The customer

It was the Department of Culture & Leisure who called me and asked me to intervene. But I didn't really give them much thought after the contract was agreed upon. To me, the librarians and caretakers were the focus.

It is an interesting perspective to consider what would have happened if the department had been more actively involved. I can imagine that they could have given me signs of improvement from their perspective.

What would they notice and where? What would they hear at meetings, read in their emails, and perhaps in the local media? What would the politicians say, who told them in the department that cooperation was working well amongst the librarians and the caretakers?

I could have pursued these signs through questions and interviews and made an "evidence-of-success" list - a list of all the good things the Department of Culture & Leisure is confident they will be noticing because of the good cooperation that will be emerging.

This list would be two-sided: one with all the specific signs of good cooperation; and one with all the resources, competences and skills which the department has experienced these two groups of people already possessing, and which will be the foundation of success.

With this list in my hands I would be able to check in on the process along the way, by letting the librarians and the caretakers relate to this outside perspective.

How would this help the process? With these statements I would have my own "reflecting team" I can call upon when necessary and let them speak to the librarians and caretakers.

An example

- When looking at this list which shows trust and confidence in your success:
- Where especially is the department correct in their statements?
 - Where else?
- What makes you satisfied with or proud of your job when you look at these statements?
 - What else?

The clients

With the caretakers and librarians I would add a more playful approach to the process today.

One could be a celebration of cooperative successes. I would place a wall calendar in a place central to all co-workers with the instruction to individually tick off a date if a success was experienced that day. Even if several people experienced a success, each one would have to tick it off. That way the calendar would have empty days, days with one or few ticks and days with many ticks.

A set of questions would be attached beneath the calendar. If you have read this far in my case story, you can imagine by now what could be helpful questions here. Just start with the sentence: “*when you look back at the dates on the calendar, - what...*”

(Hint: I’ll help you with some keywords: “impress”, “learn”, “proud”, “differently”, “more” and so on)

I would recommend the daily managers include the calendar as a regular topic on their team agendas with a simple question: “*What have you noticed lately and what would you like to notice in the coming week?*”

Why do this? First of all, because behind the playfulness is a serious task of making progress visible. Secondly, because small everyday successes are inspiring and support optimism, and make progress tangible.

The process

I am very satisfied with the simplicity of the process in the workshop. To me, it fully illustrates the essence of the solution-focused methodology:

- Create a picture of an attractive future state (future flashback)
- Focus on and strengthen existing resources (what happens already)
- Create tangible actions to continue moving towards an attractive future (next steps).

These three steps also illustrate the briefness of the solution-focused methodology - how little interference is actually needed from the outside in order to support movement in a useful direction.

When looking at the whole process from start to finish today, I would consider skipping the follow-up sessions. Instead I'd make the joint workshop one hour longer and spend more time on confidence building:

- What makes you confident that this will help you move forward in the direction of better cooperation?
- What will you notice with the stakeholders? The users, caretakers, librarians, people from the department, politicians, local citizens, students and pupils: what will tell you that you are moving in the right direction?
- And of course with the most powerful deep-diving, resource-finding question in solution-focus at the end:

“What else?”

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