Conference Report: "Authority, Leadership, and Organizational Life"

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Last month, I attended an "experimental conference" on "Authority, Leadership, and Organizational Life," which was certainly the most unusual and probably the most interesting conference that I have ever attended. In this memo, I want to try to describe sortie of the ideas and themes of the conference and suggest how they might be especially relevant to the new psychological demands of work in a changing economy.

Before I proceed, however, a caveat: in a sense, this memo attempts an impossible task, describe a conference designed explicitly to be *experienced*. As a result, it can't help but be a pale imitation of the real thing and will probably raise more questions than ii answers. Therefore, if anything here piques your curiosity, engages your attention, or provokes strong feeling (either pro or con), I'd be happy to have a conversation with you about it, There is a lot more that I could say about the conference that hasn't found its wav alto this memo.

The Background to the Conference

The conference was put on by the Boston chapter of the A.K. Rice Institute, an organization made up primarily of psychiatrists, psychologists, academics, and organizational development types with a shared interest in the psychological dynamics of groups and organizations. A.K. Rice is the U.S. cousin of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in Great Britain, an organization with a long 30-year plus tradition of applying ideas and methods drawn from psychoanalysis to the study of group dynamics

If I had to describe Tavistock's psychoanalytic perspective (at least, as I understand it), I would begin with its healthy respect for the irrationality of human behavior. Whatever our conscious motivations and intentions might be, our behavior is largely unconsciously motivated-- and often by rather primitive wishes, anxieties, fears, and feelings.

This is true, to some degree, in all human relationships. But according to the Tavistock perspective, it is especially true in groups. As much as we'd like to think that, the organizations we inhabit are rational, with clearly defined tasks and explicit roles, they are in fact a kind of theater for the expression of unconscious feelings. Indeed, the experience of authority relations in groups is especially apt to set off such primitive feelings, because group experience taps into deep memories of our original authority relations with our parents. Or in- the words of the psychoanalyst Edward Shapiro (who happened to be one of the consultants at the conference), "our first experience of an organization occurs in the family."[1]

But it's not just that unconscious feelings motivate our behavior (often despite our best intentions). Another key assumption of the Tavistock perspective is that such feelings often *conflict.* We both love authority and hate it. We are inevitably torn between a wish for dependence (to feel vulnerable and be "taken care of") and a wish for autonomy (to be

invulnerable, "independent," omni-competent). We want to establish a connection to authority, to colleagues, to the task at hand, and yet we also have feelings of aggression, competition, and rivalry toward both leaders and peers.

Effective performance in any organization, the Tavistock perspective would hold, requires paying attention to these feelings and, in a sense, learning how to "use" them. For one thing, such emotions can get in the way of rational decision-making and collaboration in the service of the task (a view that I suspect most managers would share). But the Tavistock perspective, like psychoanalysis in general, holds that these basic emotions also have an important positive role to play.

For one thing, feelings are the key to motivation. They are where a lot of our personal energy and motivation is tied up. Therefore, while it may be necessary to distance one's self from certain strong feelings or aspects of one's personality in order to take up a particular organizational role, it's important not to lose touch with them entirely. Otherwise, there is a deadening effect (in a psychological sense, you're killing part of yourself)--and that is precisely what kills energy, motivation, personal commitment.

But even more important, emotion has an essential *cognitive function*. Our feelings frame and organize what we perceive and, therefore, what we know. Put another way, our feelings are data not only about ourselves as individuals but also about organizational functioning. They give us clues to what is going on in any particular encounter--whether with another person, a small group, or even in a complex organizational setting.[2]

Finally, the Tavistock perspective doesn't stop at drawing attention to the importance of irrationality and unconscious motivation in groups and organizations. It also attempts to identify the basic mechanisms by which these motivations can shape group behavior, causing individuals

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[1] Edward R. Shapiro and A. Wesley Carr, Lost in Familiar Places: Creating New Connections Between the Individual and Society (New Haven. Yale University Press, 1991), p. 22.

[2] It's interesting that this insight on the cognitive function of the emotions is being confirmed by recent research in a completely different Field: neurobiology, in particular recent studies on "the neurobiology of rationality." For example, in his recent book; *Descartes' Error: Emotion. Reason, and the Human Brain*, the neurologist Antonio R Darnasia writes: "Feelings ... are not a luxury. They serve as internal o ides, and they help us communicate to others signals that can also guide them. And feelings are neither intangible nor elusive. Contrary to traditional scientific opinion, feelings are just as cognitive as other precepts."

to play a parallel set of roles that often have relatively little to do with the task at hand but a lot to do with the unconscious group process.

Take for example one of the key concepts in the field, known as "projective identification," a process by which particular individuals become the bearers of certain powerful group unconscious feelings. Put simply, projective identification is the tendency of individuals to "disavow" certain feelings that they find uncomfortable or unacceptable in themselves and, then, project them on to others. So, in a simple example, a person made anxious by his own wish to steal will develop a relationship with another person whom he covertly tempts-say by leaving money around-and then criticizes for being tempted.[3] In effect, the pair unconsciously collude to give expression both to the wish to steal and to the individual's fears of what will happen if he gives in to the wish (he'll get caught, be criticized. etc.), although in a complex and convoluted way.

Well, what goes on between two people goes on among many in organizations. Indeed, you might say chat, according to the Tavistock perspective, projective identification is the common currency of organizational life. So, it's not just that individuals gravitate to and take up certain informal roles based on their own unconscious motivations. They are also frequently assigned certain roles (the angry one, the voiceless one, the one who mediates conflicts, etc., etc.) based on the unconscious needs of the group. In fact, it would probably be most accurate to say that the roles we end up taking in group dynamics are a function of the interaction between our personal wishes, needs, and fears, and the group's collective wishes, needs, and fears.

That, very briefly, is "the organization according to Tavistock." -But it's important to say right away that most, of the people who attended the conference didn't have this framework in their heads at the beginning. And even for those who did, having the framework didn't really make that much difference. Because the purpose (or, to use Tavistock language, the "task") of the conference wasn't so much to learn about these concepts (indeed, they were barely mentioned). Rather, it was to experience them, as it were, in "real time"--and to experience them not just "in the head" but also "in the gut," which is to say, to feel them (remember- emotions have a cognitive function).

The Structure of the Conference

This purpose explains the curious organization of the conference. "Authority, Leadership, and Organizational Life" lasted five days. And during that time, there were no speakers, no presentations, no reading materials, and no set topics for the designated conference sessions. Instead, the only thing to study was, well, the conference itself.

In effect, the conference was a kind of "temporary organization," and our task was to study the dynamics of authority and leadership as they manifested themselves "in the moment" via the day-to-day interactions of people and groups in that organization. Here's how the conference brochure put it the conference was "a temporary educational institution which is itself available

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available as a focus of study as it evolves." And its primary task was "to provide opportunities to study the exercise of leadership and authority in the context of interpersonal, intergroup, and institutional relations within the conference institution_" This captures the self-referential and experiential quality of the event.

In this temporary organization, there were two main groups. The first group was the "membership"--i.e, the roughly fifty people who had signed up to attend the conference. Who were we? An extremely diverse group: psychiatrists and psychologists, as well as administrators from mental health centers; a smattering of academics (from places like the Kennedy School at Harvard and Wharton's Executive Education program) and graduate students with an interest in the ideas behind the conference; and, yes, some people from the mainstream business world (an internal OD consultant from Boeing, the manager from a hospice at a for-profit healthcare company in Miami, a manager from a Rohm and Haas plant, the entire "people team" from a small entrepreneurial financial services company in Philadelphia). Most of us had very little idea what we were getting into. What was this organization of which, we were told, we were now a part? Exactly what were we supposed to do?

Which brings me to the other main group at the conference: the conference "staff." These were seven professionals affiliated with the A.K. Rice Institute who were running the conference. They were psychiatrists, consultants, and academics, trained in the Tavistock tradition. They quickly became the authority figures of the conference. The term for the staff was "consultants," but they didn't behave according to any model of consulting that most managers would be familiar with. Indeed, after the opening session (where the conference director made a brief presentation on the purposes and structure of the conference), they functioned a little bit like everyone's nightmare of the "withholding therapist"--i.e., most of the time they were silent, they wouldn't respond when spoken to (even when asked a direct question), and they *certainly* wouldn't tell us what we were supposed to do. But occasionally (and with increasing frequency as the conference progressed), they would break their silence with an interpretation of what they thought was going on in the interactions of the group. Or in the words of the conference brochure describing the staff's "task" at the conference: they would "try, on the basis of their own observations and experiences, to offer working hypotheses about what is happening."

Over the course of the five days, these two groups participated in a series of conference events that can basically be divided into two types. Most of the events were "experiential"--i.e., their purpose was to encourage the examination of group dynamics as they took place in (another piece of conference jargon) the "here and now." For example, each of us was assigned to a "small group" which met five times over the course of the conference. Each group consisted of about ten people and one consultant. What were we supposed to do? The consultant wasn't telling. Was this "group psychotherapy"? Some people certainly seemed to be treating it that way. Eventually, I came to understand the small group as a kind of laboratory far observing and experiencing the dynamics of individuals in a small-group setting (a bit like the members of a team).

There was also a "large group" in. which the entire membership, roughly fifty people, met

in a large room, along with two consultants (including the director of the conference). The chairs in the room were in the shape of a spiral, so from the moment you entered the room, you were faced with a choice about your own "authority"--to sit in the center or on the periphery, to make some visible claim to a leadership role or to lose yourself in the crowd_ The large group was a difficult but fascinating experience--tailor-made to produce chaotic, disorganized, "crowd-like" behavior.

Finally, towards the end of the conference, there was something called the "Institutional Event" whose purpose was to study the entire conference experience. This was different from the small and large groups in that a.)"t was up to the membership to decide how it was going to organize itself (we quickly fragmented into about eight groups that people selected based on shared interest in a particular topic or task or simply by personal of miry); b.) we were provided by the staff with a rudimentary lexicon of three simple organizational roles (any group could send an "observer" to observe other groups, a "delegate" to represent his or her group to them, or a "plenipotentiary" who actually had the power to negotiate with other groups); and c.) the entire staff participated in the institutional event as a group of its own. Lasting a day-and-a-half, the institutional event was the closest thing at the conference to a "real" organization. It had the beginnings or a differentiated power structure; it had politics; and--most important--it had time pressure. As a result, it became a "forcing environment" for all kinds of interesting phenomena within groups, among groups, and between the membership and the staff.

In addition to these "experiential" events, there were also some more "reflective" activities where the focus was more on the "there and then"--i.e., making sense of what was going on in the conference and how it related to one's work in the organizations we all came from. For example, we were assigned to an applications and review group with others from more-or-less similar professional backgrounds (I got put with the OD consultants) where we tried to use what we were learning at the conference to make sense of some aspect of our work experience in the "real world." And, finally, there were some plenary sessions where the group as a whole discussed what was going on in the conference. In these reflective sessions, the consultants functioned in a more normal, interactive way.

That was the conference structure, in a nutshell. But knowing the structure doesn't begin to communicate what it was like to be there, to "work" in these structures over five days. This memo can't capture the details of that experience, but perhaps it can give a bit of the flavor.

What It Felt Like

My sense is that the rudimentary, stripped-down structure described above had the following effect: by getting rid of the usual things that "organize," cushion, and ultimately obscure our experience of authority--things like formal job titles and descriptions, and formalized interactions such as meetings, memos, reports, etc.-the conference forced us to confront some very basic dimensions of our experience of authority and leadership. We were brought "face-to-face" with feelings like: our wish for authority, but also our ambivalence about it; our fascination with leaders, but also our anxiety in the presence of them.

Take the example of the consultants' style. As strange and at times unpleasant this could

be in simple human terms (and, frankly, the silence of the consultants made some people furious), it did stimulate a great deal of learning. Because the consultants became a kind of "blank screen" on which people's feelings about authority could be projected and, once projected, identified and examined (that's where the consultants' interpretations came in).

The result was a setting that when it worked, allowed you both to "act" (speak up in the small or large group, have a disagreement, get into an argument, make a case for pursuing a particular line of action, etc.) and to "reflect" on your action and what it suggested about the unconscious dynamics of the group--all in "real time." And in doing so, you became aware of dimensions of your experience in the $_{group}$ and in your interactions with others that in everyday life, we tend to ignore (and, indeed, actively suppress).

For example, here are a few of the phenomena that I experienced and observed:

* people's fundamental *ambivalence* about leadership-wanting Leadership and yet hating it, wanting to be a leader and yet hanging back from unequivocally taking on the role--and the tendency of groups to "kill of anybody who tries to play a leadership role;

* the strong wish for an exclusive *special connection* to authority and the intense rivalries that develop as people compete for that connection;

* the *vulnerability* of those in leadership positions, the crucial ways in which they are dependent on their followers;

* the ways that groups seem to ignore *differences,* ironing over important variations in perspective and point of view out of a desire to avoid conflict, to be "one big happy family."

But of course, these "sound bites" don't begin to capture the complexity and the richness of the conference experience. The fact is, participating in this conference was not easy. Indeed, on the purely personal level, it was often confusing, frustrating, and occasionally painful. I have some questions in my mind at to whether this is a function of the particular Tavistock method or whether it is inherent to authority and group life. At the beginning of the conference, I was more inclined to the former view. I saw the whole organization of the conference as tailor-made to induce anxiety. But as the conference progressed, I began to see the value of the method and how it could be used to <u>learn</u> things about my own experience of authority and leadership that I would never get access 10 in a more traditional setting.

What's more, however tough the experience of the conference could be personally, it was also tremendously exhilarating and (to use a bit of "management-speak'`) "empowering." Let a small personal example stand in for the whole: of the many different conference "events," the one I found myself hating the most was the large group. There we were, fifty people from extremely diverse backgrounds, packed into a room, with no clear purpose or goal (besides the vague "task" of the conference brochure). The setting produced in me a sense of enormous futility. How was it possible to influence such a group? How could it possibly define any

common purpose or move in any clearly defined direction. In the first large group meeting I found myself sitting on the periphery feeling alienated and anxious--a spectator to the action, not a participant. And yet, by the third and last large-group meeting, very much under the influence of a certain risk-taking encouraged by the conference experience, I found myself sitting in the center and playing an active role in shaping (well, trying hard to shape) the flow of the conversation and debate. And what was so striking to me at the time was the realization that sitting in the center, which I had imagined would make me more anxious, in fact had precisely the opposite effect. It was an experience of "finding" my own authority in the conference, an island of calm and purpose in what was still a large and inevitably somewhat chaotic group.

Some Takeaways

As the above suggests, I learned a lot about my own personal strengths and weaknesses in group settings. But I also acquired some basic insights that seem to me to be of more than merely personal interest

1) I came away from the conference with a much greater appreciation of what you might call "the secret life of organizations"-i.e., the rich depths of emotional information that are potentially available in any organizational setting or encounter. The consultants at the conference talked a lot about "data," but they tended to use the word rather differently from the way most consultants do. The "data" they were talking about was "internal," not "external-" It was the data of their own personal and emotional experience in a role. This kind of experiential, emotional data is an important source of information about organizational functioning, and it is possible to become "attuned" to it, to develop antennae with which to "listen" to it. That's what the consultants were doing--using their own personal experience in their roles at the conference to understand what was happening in the various group settings. That's what we were learning how to do ourselves.

2) I also came away with a conviction about the importance (for individuals, but perhaps for organizations as well) of creating a "middle ground" between the purely "personal". and the purely "impersonal"--or, to put it slightly differently, between the "private" and the "public." That sounds opaque so let me try to explain what I mean.

As difficult as personal relationships can sometimes be, we tend to know how to act in a situation that is purely personal-with one's spouse, say, or with a close friend. And we also know, or think we do, how to be impersonal in a work setting-to follow a routine, to keep our feelings and personality out of the way, to function in a role, whatever. But that split between personal and impersonal is a false "either-or," because of course if we never find a way to make our work personal, it becomes deadening. And that lack of engagement kills our capacity far insight, motivation, and commitment. The trick is to find ways to be personal that are relevant to playing a particular role or contributing to the achievement of a collective task. When you encounter that middle ground, it frees up enormous energies and capacities for personal commitment-which is the life's blood of organizational effectiveness.

3) The third lesson I took away from the conference is very much connected to the above two. It goes something like this: for all the "artificiality" of the conference setting, I found that it had remarkable parallels to the "place" where many organizations find themselves today. Think about it: the stripped-down structure (downsizing, outsourcing, continuous reorganization), the vague task and roles (what business are we in? what's my job? what's my role?), the shadowy nature of authority (who has it? how do you get things done?), the challenge of connecting across boundaries (how do we build shared understanding? transfer learning? "manage" knowledge? innovate?). The conference may have made us all feel crazy, but that's not so different from what managers and employees are feeling in a lot of the organizations that I know about! For that reason, I found the conference (and the Tavistock perspective in general) a refreshing and extremely stimulating "vantage point" from which to view the organizational challenges of authority, leadership, and work in a changing economy.

The thing that intrigues me about the Tavistock perspective is that it provides an extremely well developed vocabulary, logic, and (most important) practice for understanding and engaging with what I increasingly see as a key dimension of work in the new economy--the place where the personal and the organizational, the "private" and the "public" intersect. At a time when, arguably, acuity about interpersonal and organizational dynamics is becoming an important part of what it means to be an effective manager, the conference exposed me to a powerful way of building that kind of insight, a way that I want to explore further. .