Understanding Conflict, Polarization & Change

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Session Objectives

• Provide opportunities for self-reflection around conflict, polarization, & change
• Rethink Conflict
• Promote awareness of the concept of Reflective Structured Dialogue
• Consider some elements that need to be present to effectively manage change

Some Disorienting Challenges

• Preparing a community to deal with protest
• What bathroom should a trans child use
• Black lives matter vs. all lives matter
• Cancel culture
• #MeToo / Believe Women
• Repatriation of artifacts
• Defunding police/role of police in civil society
• Free speech/safe space on campus
• Cultural appropriation
• Diversity statements in Higher Education
Adaptive Leadership

- Research by Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky at Harvard University formed the basis for Adaptive Leadership theory.
- Leadership framework that helps individuals and organizations adapt to:
  - changing environments, and
  - effectively respond to recurring problems
  - with no known solutions.
- The ability to convene, facilitate and engage with difficult conversations is an adaptive leadership competency.

Thinking as an Adaptive Leader

Understanding Conflict

Myths/Truths of Conflict

1. Myth: Conflict means something has gone wrong.
   Truth: Conflict may indicate that something important has changed and what might have worked in the past no longer works.
2. Myth: Conflict is a sign of poor communication.
   Truth: There are many reasons why people may engage in conflict.
3. Myth: The people in conflict are in the wrong.
   Truth: Each person in conflict is in the right according to their perspective.
4. Myth: The solution to conflict is a compromise.
   Truth: Sometimes the answer to conflict is to seek to understand the perspectives of others and to reflect on one's own perspectives.
5. Myth: The absence of conflict is the sign of a good relationship.
   Truth: The absence of conflict could indicate that a relationship or the organization has flattened.
6. Myth: Nice people don't have conflict.
   Truth: The best relationships are a mix of give and take, and understanding each other's differences.

- When thinking about conflict, we are forever influenced by messages that we received as a child.
- What were some of the messages that you received growing up and how do those messages influence you as a leader today?

Polarization: A Self-Perpetuating System

- Ryan Nakade’s reflections on Chapter 7 of Peter Coleman’s book –
- The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization
Complicate the Problem

- Polarization and hyper partisanship keep us from seeing the full scope of any problem.
- Highly complex problems are reduced to oversimplified soundbites.
- Since we see the solution to the simple problem as so “obvious” we get annoyed with those who disagree.
- Try complexity mapping
  - Hidden variables that elude superficial understanding
  - Think systemically and holistically

Complicating our way of thinking

- Improves our relations with others
- Leads to more accurate perceptions of reality
- Gives us the knowledge and attitudes to address wicked problems which are multi-dimensional, highly complex, with intricately entangled issues with many variables and moving parts
- NO EASY ANSWERS
- Prepares us to negotiate, problem solve, connect and maybe heal

Complicate the Narratives

- Amplifying nuance, contradiction and ambiguity
- Amanda Ripley – “Revive complexity in a time of false simplicity.”
- Resist your sources of information.
- Look for sources that do not necessarily support what you already believe.

Coleman’s Research shows that...

Acknowledging your own contradictions, embracing other’s contradictions, and tolerating ambiguity leads to being:

- Happier
- Healthier
- Better able to cope with major changes
- Better able to make quality complex decisions

An Antidote to Toxic Polarization

Reflective Structured Dialogue

Leaders are obligated to know:

How to create a safe-enough space for difficult conversations
One Way of Thinking:

• Someone is right (me), and someone is wrong (guess who?).
• There are objective facts (mine) and mistaken beliefs, perceptions, ideas (yours).
• Conceding a point is a sign of weakness.
• Conflict is a win-lose proposition (and I’m here to win).
• Your disagreement with me means you are:
  § Ignorant
  § Mistaken
  § Gullible
  § Evil

Another Way of Thinking:

• Right and wrong are influenced by core values, beliefs and worldviews.
• We construct our own reality before gathering data.
• Acknowledging the other person’s point of view can be both advantageous and wise.
• Conflict usually involves both content and relationship and “winning” may have multiple meanings.
• The picture may change when we share all pieces to the puzzle.

A Dialogic Mindset

• I bring my ideas with an attitude of openness about there being other ideas that might influence mine.
• I am open to challenging my own assumptions.
• I’m interested in learning about your perspective, by listening carefully to your experience and meaning.
• I’m hoping to create a shared understanding that is broader and more complex than the one I started with.

Goals of RSD

This is a challenge? People often want to immediately jump to solutions!

Significant shifts happen as people begin to try to understand the views of others and to look more closely and reevaluate their own views.

To pursue mutual understanding rather than agreements or immediate solutions.

A good dialogue offers participants a chance to:

1. Listen and be listened to with care.
2. Speak and be spoken to in a respectful manner.
3. Learn about the perspectives of others.
4. Reflect on one’s own views.

Goals of RSD

• SPEAKING respectfully
  § To be understood
  § Connected to personal experiences & heartfelt concerns
  § Responsive to fresh questions
  § Reflective, not reactive

• LISTENING to understand, not to debate
• INQUIRING with genuine (not rhetorical) questions
• REFLECTING on the perspectives of others and your own

The Container for RSD

Clarity on purpose of the dialogue

Participants must agree on purpose, structure & communication agreements

Steps for an RSD Session

1. Preparation
2. Welcome and Orientation
3. Introductions
4. Review Structure & Agreements
5. Opening Questions (3 rounds)
6. Questions of Genuine Interest
7. Closing and plan for what happens next

Our pre-course communications and survey

We will do this before we break into small groups for the actual RSD

The actual “in hold” part of RSD
To Create Safety, You Must Have Structure

**RSD**
- Uses a series of rounds with communication agreements that work to help participants break unproductive communication patterns
- Supports listening for understanding rather than listening for an opening to respond

- Reflect
- Write
- Speak

Structure of RSD

**Sequenced Questions**
- Rounds 1-3, respond in order of seating
- Round 4, popcorn style
- The right to “pass” or “pass for now”
- Time limited - reflection & speaking

- **The Pause**
  - Gives closure to the previous speaker
  - Reduces reactivity
  - Prepares an open space for the next speaker

Virtual Trainings:
Your facilitator shares an order for you to follow at the start.

Managing Change

The Right Formula

Vision + Skills + Incentives + Resources + Action Plan = **CHANGE**
Vision + _____ + Incentives + Resources + Action Plan = **CONFUSION**
Vision + _____ + Incentives + Resources + Action Plan = **ANXIETY**
Vision + Skills + _____ + Resources + Action Plan = **RESISTANCE**
Vision + Skills + Incentives + _____ + Action Plan = **FRUSTRATION**
Vision + Skills + Incentives + Resources + _____ = **CHAOS**

Formula for Effectively Leading Change

Thank you!

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