

COLLABORATING DEPENDS ON THE QUALITY OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Returning from a week of working away from home, sitting on a jam-packed train; I am dog-tired and wondering how on earth I can pull together this month's article. I appear to have no threads to pull on, so instead I decide to sit back, close my eyes and contemplate the theme. I find myself returning to my experiences from earlier this week, which I realise have helped to progress my thinking and understanding about some of what can help collaboration to work.

I have been partnering another organisation to deliver a programme of technical and organisational development support to a group that is spinning out from a health sector setting to become a social enterprise. My partners are providing the bulk of the technical, in-depth cross-sector knowledge and I have been supporting the human process of change, helping the leaders, staff and the group as a whole, grow their individual and collective capacities to step into a whole new way of working with, adapting to and being in their 'new' world. Everything about this working partnership and relationship has been a surprise and a delight even though we have had some extraordinarily difficult and unexpected challenges and surprises to handle.

When I consider what I think about my partners and indeed our clients, I am struck by noticing first, my feelings. I am aware of being extremely fond of everyone in the mix. Now, there may be many consultants who might be shocked by my declaration because they might believe that *'as consultants, we are not meant to get so involved; that a consultant's job is to provide a professional service; to be friendly but not friends; to be task focused and not get overly involved at a human level'*. Certainly there is something important in the message but its absolutism is unhelpful because it suggests that simply by withholding the more human aspects of ourselves we can offer a better service. Personally, I think this can do completely the opposite because it perpetuates one of the most damaging elements of current organisational life – an artificial compartmentalizing that has people suppressing their emotional realities. When we do this, we deny ourselves access to information that can move us to action or call us to pause and reflect – our emotions. When we are emotionally disconnected, we lose crucial data that supports our ability to effectively make meaning both within and between ourselves; and in so doing we compromise our abilities to take choice-ful potent, effective action.

What has been remarkable about the collaboration in this partnership project is the scale and frequency of life incidents that have besieged one or other of us at different times. This has been true both within the partnership group as well as within the client organisation. I was curious about what had helped us to stay on track. As I pondered on my question, I realised that certain behaviours had emerged and supported us along the way. When the first life event hit one of our group, a crucially different thing happened. Rather than leaving them to cope on their own, we **engaged with each other's realities**. We moved closer, not further away and by doing so we discovered more about our vulnerabilities and strengths, our struggles and, later on our, dreams. We came to know and understand each other more deeply. Daring to open up more to each other, forged a stronger connection and friendship between us that added to our abilities to work more cohesively and coherently. We became more invested in **taking care of each other, our shared endeavour and our clients**.

Also, on the face of it, our people resources became more limited but because of the strength of our connection and commitment, the challenge merely called on us to become more creative with the roles and to **make more of what we had available between us**. And because we had begun to find out much more about who we were, we had already begun to discover that we each had so much more to bring to the table.

I believe the crucial element that opened up the space for this remarkable partnership to emerge, was that we allowed ourselves to **open up and be touched emotionally** by the challenges we were facing as human beings. In being touched, we were changed; and in being changed, new possibilities have begun to show up for us all. To me, this is the key to transformation.

I feel blessed to be a part of something that feels so full of potential, so connecting, so very exciting and so counter-culture to most people's working realities.

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