

Article 3: Managing Meaning ~ towards understanding 'Inspiration' and 'Motivation'

I was in it – one of those situations most of us hope will never happen. And here it was happening to me. Frozen in the middle of a group of executive managers I was devoid of all my faculties in that moment when 3 out of 5 of them blasted out their indignation at the words I had just uttered:

'When you dig to the roots of motivation, there is always FEAR'.

They were incensed and one of them shouted at me:

'I have been motivating people for the last 30 years and you're telling me that I have done it all through fear!'

I was stunned into silence, wondering where this outrage had come from. I had been working with this Top Team for some months. I felt we had been making great progress together because several of them had asked me to work with their own directorate management teams. I assumed this meant that trust and understanding was growing between us.

On this particular occasion I thought I was merely re-iterating our journey travelled, as we prepared to launch the organisation's ground-breaking Leadership Development programme – a programme which had emerged through our work together; the essence of which was about 'inspiring' leaders as distinct from 'motivating' them.

I had used 'those words' several times at previous development events with them, as well as with their senior and middle managers and elected members. Others in the organisation had got it – the energy and excitement amongst them had been palpable as the promise of a new era began to take shape. Why was it, on this occasion with the executive team – coincidentally, when the Chief Executive had had to leave the room - that suddenly this statement about 'motivation' activated such vitriol and negativity? I found myself shocked and confused.

In conversations with several of them subsequently, I sought feedback about the difficult exchange. I was told that it was not me they had had an issue with. I found out that in the previous 3 months over December to February when I had not seen them, the Chief Executive had been doing things that they did not like or agree with. He was challenging them individually and collectively and they were unhappy about it. They interpreted his actions negatively, colluded with their interpretations..... and so, in their minds, they believed him to be untrustworthy. This 'Interpretation' had become 'reality' in their eyes; and because it was he who had brought me in to work with them..... in that moment, they chose to believe that I too, was no longer to be trusted.

Making Meanings does not mean they are true

If any of you reading this account have experienced a situation similar to this, I imagine you will know how uncomfortable it can be. At times like this our minds can run out of control with all sorts of interpretations, self-judgments and self-accusations (read my April article for more illumination). We also fantasise about what other people might be thinking or saying about us. In short, we make up meanings or 'fictions' about any situation based on our own past experiences, our beliefs and our own cultural frames of reference. This affects how we feel which then drives how we react. They had 'made a meaning' about their Chief Executive which they then applied to me; their thoughts led them to feel angry (amongst other things) and this played out in their behaviour. Based on their behaviour, I then made a meaning about them (and myself) and that affected how I felt and reacted.

In the moment of their outrage, I found I could not explain why I believe there is a relationship between motivation and fear. I sensed it to have validity. But having this 'inner knowing' was not helping me to communicate my meaning and understanding behind it – especially in the midst of their outwardly expressed anger and upset; and my shock being on the receiving end of their emotional outbursts.

Added to this, I then became annoyed with myself – which was equally unhelpful. The assumption (and accusation) leading to my annoyance and loss of words, was that if I had been better prepared, then none of this would have happened! My assumption had nothing to do with what was going on in their minds.

Was my statement about motivation 'fundamentally true' or 'fundamentally false'? Actually, neither; and in actual fact it was irrelevant because something else was at play and in question – their relationship with their Boss; which became projected onto my relationship with them! Several years on, and in hindsight with far greater experience to fall back on, I can see that had I been more aware of the group process in the moment, I



might have been able to recognise that something else was playing out. But because I did not know what had been going on in the previous 3 months, I assumed their reaction was all about 'the statement'. So that was what I focused on. In other words, the meaning I was making about the situation rendered me blind to other possible meanings or 'explanations' for their behaviour.

So my first internal reaction found me vowing that I would never let that happen to me again (as if I could assure that!). The next driving assumption playing out in my mind was that my life depended on it! I 'had' to find a way to represent the distinction between 'inspiration' and 'motivation'.

Turning Pain into Purpose

It was later, on deeper reflection, I saw that I had not paid full enough attention to their group process. I had become attached to having them think the same as me, and had lost connection with my own deeper intention of being a medium for others to access their own insights and learning. I had moved into 'telling' rather than creating pathways for discovery. With this awareness, I recognised that, although I may have lost the opportunity to continue working with this group of people, I could still transform my learning into something useful for others in the future.

In the immediate aftermath of that situation, my energy (motivation) started out as a driven 'need to prove and protect' myself. By re-framing the situation – choosing to see it as a transformative learning experience rather than a 'career-destroying disaster' - I transformed my fear-driven motivation into an energising intention (purpose) that I was excited by: to use my own learning in the service of others. This was when motivation turned into inspiration. I was no longer driven by fear but by my inner sense of purpose to serve. I reconnected to my source of inspiration; my passion for inspiring leaders.

I resolved firstly, to find a way to convey the rationale behind the 'infamous statement'. More importantly, I renewed my commitment to my own development - to help me improve my attention to the individual and group process. And allied to this, I resolved to share my perspectives only when and if an issue begins to reveal itself within an individual's or group process – in other words, to share only when something is being 'called for' rather than my 'forcing' it in uninvited.

Turning Purpose into Action

Did I find a way to convey the distinction between 'inspiration' and 'motivation'? Oh yes! It was an intriguing and absorbing journey of discovery.... and when an image and metaphor finally revealed itself to me, well I could have popped with excitement! I love sharing it because the journey to its conception was so painful and yet also a perfect embodiment of the two concepts. [Do contact me if you are interested in finding out more!]

The gifts of my horribly exposing experience are that I have a story to tell; a model to share when the right moment arises; and I am a far better facilitator as a result. Yes – it would have been great if I could have continued with that group of executives..... and yet, in reality I have a much more enduring legacy that has benefitted many more people since that time.

Managing Meaning

As is evident from this story, all the characters were caught up in unconsciously making up meanings about what other people said and did. Assumptions were made that actually resulted in relationship breakdown. This all comes back to the importance of becoming increasingly aware of our inner feelings, and the interpretations we are making about others, ourselves and the situations we find ourselves in. The more tuned in and courageous we are in picking up on some of the nonsense that goes on in our heads, the more trustworthy we become in the eyes of others – because we develop greater mastery in managing our own meaning making, which supports our ability to respond more creatively and constructively, which in turn improves our ability to build, maintain and repair relationships with our intimates, our friends and colleagues.

The rewards are undeniable!

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