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The Role of First-Person Inquiry and Developmental Capacity on Transforming Perspectives About Facilitating Organizational Change

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to examine through the lens of first-person inquiry, what it means to be a change agent attempting to navigate the complexities of organizational change. By engaging in first-person inquiry, facilitators can gain tremendous insight not only into the system, but their own capacity to effect organizational change. Through the process of critical reflection, transformative learning occurs when we connect new information and experiences with our existing frames of reference. Examining the inherent individual, group, and systemic challenges that can seem disorienting to facilitators, especially when they are attempting to create conditions for organizational change within a system that resists change and pushes back, can help change agents gain insight and transform their perspectives on the role of facilitation. Critical reflection can generate opportunities for transformative learning when facilitators reassess their assumptions and expectations about what it means to lead change within the systemic constraints of their organizations. By engaging in deep reflection and active collaboration, facilitators can transform their understanding of themselves, how they relate to others, the way they and others make meaning, and how learning and change take place within organizational contexts.

Keywords: transformative learning, first-person inquiry, developmental capacity, organizational change, facilitation

Introduction

In this essay, I examine the disorienting dilemma facilitators may face when adapting to the individual, group, and systemic challenges interfering with their attempts at effecting organizational change. More specifically, I draw upon my personal experience of working with stakeholders within my own organization to facilitate change during a period of rapid growth and uncertainty. Attempting the process of change as an insider transformed my understanding of how facilitating groups requires patience, the ability to listen, recognizing individual, group, and systemic constraints, reacting to that which is emerging in the context around you, and adapting accordingly. This is not always easy, as facilitating groups also means considering where you are developmentally and becoming comfortable with not having all the answers. Moreover, there must be individual, group, and systemic readiness for change to take place. Even when there is readiness on the individual and group levels, change will not occur if the system does not support it. Consequently, my attempts at facilitating change increased my awareness of the tremendous influence the system has on organizational members. Those attempting organizational change should also remember it is extremely difficult to subsume a system of which you are a part. The challenges posed by the system can lead facilitators to feel frustrated in their change efforts. However, by adopting the method of first-person inquiry, facilitators can gain tremendous insight not only into the system, but their own capacity to effect organizational change. Hence, my purpose here is to explore how the practice of reflection *in action* focuses not only outward in examining the changes

taking place in the organization, but also inward in terms of exploring the transformation taking place among those directly involved in the change process. Furthermore, this essay also examines the opportunities for transformative learning that come with facilitating change along with the challenges and complexity arising from negotiating the constraints imposed on organizational members by the system.

Describing the significance of reflection in transformative learning, Mezirow (1997) discusses how we "transform our frames of reference through critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based" (p. 7). Through the process of critical reflection, transformative learning occurs when we connect new information and experiences with our existing frames of reference. After experiencing a disorienting dilemma, one of the subsequent phases of transformative learning Mezirow (2012) discusses involves "a critical assessment of assumptions" (p. 86). Merriam (2004) explains our critical reflection on assumptions as premise reflection involving "assumptions we hold about self…cultural systems in which we live…our workplace…our ethical decision making…or feelings and dispositions" (p. 62), supporting her contention of the crucial link between critical reflection and transformative learning.

Coghlan and Brannick (2010) explain how reflection in action "occurs when you are in the middle of an action and you ask questions about what you are doing and what is happening around you" (p. 19). In terms of facilitating change, reflection in action involves engaging in first-person inquiry and taking into consideration your own assumptions as a facilitator as well as actor and director playing a significant role in trying to initiate some type of organizational change effort. As a result, reflecting in action can help facilitators increase their capacity for understanding the inherent complexity involved in effecting change. While organizational change can be tremendously rewarding, it is also extremely difficult. Nevertheless, engaging in the process of critical reflection also has the potential to increase the developmental capacity of those who lead change efforts. In the next section, I examine how first-person inquiry and engaging in self-reflection impact developing the capacity for facilitating change within organizations as well as within one's self. As for my own practice as a change facilitator, even now, my journey continues.

First-Person Inquiry

In discussing the validity or quality of first-person inquiry as a research method, Marshall and Reason (2007) contend "quality becomes having, or seeking, a capacity for self-reflection, so that we engage our full vitality in the inquiry and attend to the perspectives and assumptions we are carrying" (p. 369). Hence, reflection is a key indicator of quality in first-person inquiry. Since first-person inquiry involves facilitators inquiring directly into their own intentions, assumptions, experiences, and behaviors, the focus is on reflecting *in* rather than *on* action. Marshall (2001) discusses the self-reflective nature of first-person inquiry by describing three frameworks around which to structure such practice. First, inquiry requires moving between the inner and outer arcs of attention. By being mindful of their inner arcs, facilitators can increase their awareness of how they frame issues, make meaning, and choose to speak out. Pursuing their outer arcs of attention requires moving outside themselves and actively engaging in second-person inquiry with others to raise questions, test assumptions, and learn through collaboration. The second framework involves the classic action research format of engaging in cycling between action and reflection consisting of planning, acting, and reflecting while also maintaining the inner and outer tracking of attention; which are key aspects of self-reflective first-person inquiry. Adopting the practice of planning, action, and reflection are essential skills for facilitators to develop. The third framework involves being both active and receptive of one's behavior and being. Referring to the work of Bakan (1966), Marshall (2001) describes the dual notions of agency or independence and self-control within one's environment and communion or interdependence and connection with others and how these approaches influence acting, speaking, and meaning-making.

Marshall and Reason (2007) point out that first-person inquiry involves adopting an attitude of inquiry that "incorporates noticing how identity, ethnicity, class, our positioning in the world impact our research, and being aware of the creative potential that this awareness makes available in speaking a perspective and acting inquiringly" (pp. 369-370). Marshall (2004) also examines the practice of first, second, and third-person inquiry. Through the process of engaging collaboratively in second-person inquiry, individuals must also exercise self-reflective first-person inquiry which, as their understanding increases, encourages them to engage further in third-person inquiry to influence wider systems. Reason and Marshall (1987) describe first-person, second-person, and third-person inquiry as integrating three audiences—in that research exists for me, for us, and for them.

Reason (1991) illustrates how "the origins of first-person inquiry lie in the work of Argyris and Schon and their descriptions of action science to explore the fit and misfit between theories-in-use and espoused theories (Argyris et al., 1985) and the 'reflective practitioner' (Schon, 1983)" (p. 187). Reason and Bradbury (2001) define first person inquiry as "the ability of the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act awarely and choicefully, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting" (p. xxv). When engaging in first-person inquiry, Marshall (1999, 2001, 2016) and Taylor (2004) point out how we often choose topics of inquiry reflecting our own lives and experiences in order to make meaning. Torbert (2004) explains first-person inquiry occurs when "we seek the attentiveness—the presence of mind—to begin noticing the relationships among our intuitive sense of purpose, thoughts, behaviors, and effects. In this way we gradually generate increasing integrity within ourselves" (p. 38).

In addition, Torbert (2004) discusses how, by using second-person inquiry in our conversations with others, we can more effectively seek to establish a sense of mutuality or mutual commitment between our experiences and those of others by interweaving the four parts of speech consisting of framing, advocating, illustrating, and inquiring to influence action. Hence, by adopting a more collaborative approach to inquiry, facilitators can gain self-awareness and realize they are not alone in their experiences. By engaging simultaneously in the processes of first-person and second-person inquiry, facilitators can also gain greater insight into organizational culture, allowing them to adapt to the individual, collective, and systemic forces potentially challenging their organizational change efforts. In the next section, I examine more specifically the impact of developmental capacity in facilitating change.

The Role of Developmental Capacity in Facilitating Change

By engaging in first-person inquiry, I have come to understand how the questions we ask or fail to ask as facilitators significantly influence the outcomes we experience. Therefore, a key takeaway for facilitators attempting the difficult task of leading change is to acknowledge and confront the tremendous barriers to change existing within ourselves, our stakeholders, and the system. Practicing first-person inquiry has encouraged me to become more aware of how facilitators must first have clarity in their purpose, the outcomes they want to achieve, and the questions they ask. Lacking clarity in any these key areas can lead to tremendous confusion and misdirection for all concerned. Clarity becomes especially important during times of rapid organizational change where organizational stakeholders are searching for answers to reduce the uncertainty inherent in the change process. However, before creating the conditions necessary for stakeholders to adapt to change, facilitators must first come to terms with their own developmental capacity for navigating change.

According to Nicolaides and McCallum (2014), "increased developmental capacity at the individual and collective levels allows for (though does not guarantee) greater ability to undertake the challenges of action research, and to engage a wider range of skillful, creative, and even transformational actions" (p. 55). Moreover, Nicolaides (2015) explains the experience of ambiguity has the potential to generate the capacity for learning and meaning-making through reflection by intentionally connecting with others who are also encountering the experience in question. In discussing the connection between development and transformative learning, Merriam (2004) argues "although transformative learning

appears to lead to a more mature, more autonomous, more 'developed' level of thinking, it might also be argued that to be able to engage in the process in the first place requires a certain level of development, and in particular, cognitive development" (p. 61).

My attempts at facilitating organizational change forced me to consider where I was at developmentally and how my own level of development impacted my attempts at facilitating change. Critical reflection helped me better understand how my own lived experience impacted the choices I made or perhaps failed to make. In addition, I was also confronted by the systemic boundaries of an organization that resisted change and rewarded maintaining the status quo. As an insider I played it safe in terms of my own comfort level combined with operating safely within the limitations of the system. However, by playing it safe, I also avoided controversy and confrontation by giving in to systemic constraints. Through the process of first-person inquiry, I realized how the system exerted its influence in terms of how I approached facilitation and interacted with stakeholders. My questions were enough to spark interest but not controversy; and discussion without resulting in meaningful action. While not serving as an excuse for inaction, systemic push back can present a major dilemma for change agents. More specifically, if facilitators have not yet reached the developmental stage where they can confront their own limitations, as well as those imposed by the system, how can they expect to effectively create the conditions necessary to help others?

The Role of Facilitation in Organizational Change

From my own experiences at attempting to facilitate organizational change, I learned to examine how my own assumptions and positionality can impact the change process. For example, Coghlan and Brannick (2010) and Scharmer (2009) maintain there must be a readiness within the system to engage in meaningful organizational change. According to Schein (1996), Lewin thought you cannot really understand a system until you attempt to change it. Mezirow (2000) explains how learning can be enhanced or inhibited by the environment or physical setting. Scharmer (2009, 2018) describes the holding space as the context which allows for a shift toward a deeper understanding on both individual and collective levels.

My own realization of the system exerting influence on when, what, and if change occurs is a phenomenon I had to experience firsthand to fully comprehend. The system resisted change by creating a culture of fear and intimidation insiders knew not to cut across. When pushed, the system, like HAL in the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968), sustained its equilibrium by pushing back against those who attempted to disrupt the status quo. Those within the system quickly learned just how far they could push before they found themselves on the receiving end of disciplinary action or in some cases termination. Consequently, an unsafe systemic culture can contribute to both facilitators and stakeholders developing a sense of learned helplessness or "paralysis" that prevents them from feeling empowered to act. Instead, they merely go through the motions thinking their efforts have little or no real impact.

In addition to contending with systemic influences, facilitators must also grapple with group and individual influences impacting change. Facilitators attempting to create holding spaces encouraging stakeholder collaboration may not begin to really understand themselves until they confront the numerous individual, group, and systemic hurdles challenging their efforts to create conditions for change. Therefore, before helping stakeholders navigate the complexity of organizational change, facilitators must first become aware of their own developmental capacity by gaining self-awareness. According to Merriam (2009), researcher positionality or reflexivity involves critical reflection on the self as a human instrument to take into consideration "biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken" (p. 219). Maxwell (2005) explains "the researcher is part of the world he or she studies" (p. 109) while Coghlan and Brannick (2010) discuss how reflexivity explores "the relationship between the researcher and the object of research" (p. 41). As applied to facilitating organizational change, through the processes of first-person and second-person inquiry, facilitators can develop greater awareness by

examining the self as an instrument for facing the inherent challenges that come with attempting to facilitate organizational change.

One of the goals I set for myself as a novice facilitator was something as simple as finding and expressing my voice and having a purpose. My perspective and perhaps confidence in facilitating change transformed when I realized I did have to possess all the answers, and for that matter, it was not my role to come into the situation providing stakeholders with a neat package of ready-made solutions. Of course, I needed to help stakeholders remain focused and on track, but it was their responsibility to actively engage and risk getting messy with the task at hand. Moreover, I also had to get messy and confront the individual and systemic influences impacting my efforts at attempting organizational change. Consequently, a key takeaway for facilitators is to first confront the messiness of knowing yourself. Gaining insight into the system and its influence is also extremely beneficial. In the next section, I examine the transformation in my own understanding of taking on the difficult task of facilitating organizational change. More specifically, I explore how facilitators must confront the inherent individual, group, and systemic limitations impacting change and how reflection and awareness into the influence of developmental capacity can transform our notions of facilitating organizational change.

Transformative Learning and Facilitating Organizational Change

Mezirow (2000, 2009, 2012) explains transformative learning begins when we experience some disorienting dilemma or problem that causes us to question our fundamental assumptions or habits of mind making up the frame of reference or meaning perspective by which we cognitively, affectively, and instinctively structure our assumptions and expectations. Brookfield (2000) argues “an act of learning can be called transformative only if it involves a fundamental questioning and reordering of how one thinks or acts” (p. 139). Taylor (2009) describes individual experience, critical reflection, dialogue, and awareness of context as core elements of transformative learning. Cranton (2006) points out transformative learning takes place “when people critically examine their habitual expectations, revise them, and act on that revised point of view” (p. 19). In my own experience, the major dilemma I faced regarding facilitating change was coming to terms with defining my role as a facilitator and critically assessing my assumptions on what that role meant. Looking back, I lacked not only experience in method and approach, as well as clarity of purpose, but also the confidence to think my efforts could lead to meaningful change in an organizational context that rewarded maintaining the status-quo.

My experience became transformative when, through the practice of first-person and second-person inquiry, I made meaning around my role as a facilitator and recognized my own vulnerability and reticence around the issue of pushing back against systemic constraints. For example, I have come to understand the disorienting dilemma of my tendency to shy away from confrontation, controversy, and action. Interestingly, the very system of which I was a part fed and rewarded my pull toward inaction. In retrospect, I appreciated the boundaries the system imposed because they provided me with a convenient excuse for not pushing myself or my stakeholders beyond those limits. The process of reflective first-person inquiry helped me transform my understanding of how the system can influence and constrain individual and group efforts to effect change. By shedding light here on the impact systemic influences can have on our efforts at facilitating change, I hope other facilitators can recognize their limitations, test their assumptions, and push beyond their boundaries.

As noted earlier, Merriam (2004) contends, “Critical reflection on experience is key to transformational learning” (p. 62). The ability to engage in critical reflection and reflective discourse requires advanced cognitive development. According to Mezirow (1991), development is central to transformative learning. Through the process of self-examination and critical assessment, I recognized the need to redefine my role in the change process and gain greater confidence in asserting my voice. The experience was humbling in that I realized change agents often go into organizations thinking anyone can effect change in any system. However, this is a major misconception. There is no “one size fits all”

formula for successfully implementing organizational change that works consistently every time in every organization.

It is especially difficult to change a system of which you are a part. This conclusion leads me to advise facilitators to recognize the importance of the self as an instrument. The methods we select will not be effective if we cannot consider, through the process of engaging in first-person inquiry, our own capability to bring about change. The energy to engage collaboratively with others in the process of co-inquiry into organizational change must flow through us. Fundamentally, we must know what we can and cannot do intellectually, physically, spiritually, and emotionally to be effective in helping bring about change. If we cannot, then perhaps it is time to step back until which time we can be more present.

Facilitators must also be aware of how individual and organizational dynamics impact their change efforts. Brookfield (2009) maintains "critical reflection focuses not on how to work more effectively or productively within an existing system, but on calling the foundations and imperatives of the system itself into question, assessing their morality, and considering alternatives" (p. 127). Critical reflection can generate opportunities for transformative learning when facilitators reassess their assumptions and expectations about what it means to lead change within the systemic constraints of their organizations. By engaging in deep reflection and active collaboration, facilitators can transform their understanding of themselves, how they relate to others, the way they and others make meaning, and how learning and change take place within organizational contexts.

Implications and Conclusions

One suggestion I would like to offer facilitators of organizational change relates to the difficulty of subsuming the system of which you are a part. Understanding the self as an instrument means examining individual, collective, and systemic limitations as well as the readiness for change on each of these levels. Coghlan and Brannick (2010) and Scharmer (2009) point out organizational change will not occur until there is a readiness from the system. As I have attempted to illustrate in this essay, individual, group, and systemic factors interfere with our change efforts. However, as Mezirow (1997) argues, transformative learning can take place through the process of critical reflection and changing existing frames of reference. If becoming an effective facilitator involves gaining insight into one's limitations as well as strengths, then my experiences have taught me to recognize how easy it is to give in to the influence of the system and avoid action. Then again, engaging in critical reflection has encouraged me to question why this phenomenon occurs and how to adapt more effectively to the challenges that come with attempting to effect change.

Even in situations where individual and group readiness exists to discuss organizational change, a similar sense of readiness may not be present within the system. When this occurs, the system can push back and discourage change and instead reward maintaining the status-quo. The takeaway for facilitators is they must not only consider the limitations of their own developmental capacity for effecting organizational change, but also understand the influence the system has in contributing to the complexity and uncertainty of their efforts. Realizing this as they go into organizational settings can be tremendously helpful as facilitators can recognize and respond to these multifaceted conditions more effectively. If they are not careful, facilitators can often fall into a pattern of replicating the very systemic practices they espouse to change. Hence, these suggestions underscore the importance of facilitators engaging in the process of reflective practice both in and on action.

Adopting an attitude of inquiry means not only understanding how to make meaning in action, but also realizing how meaning is distinct for each person. As a result, each person must develop their own practice, attend to their inner and outer arcs of attention, and become mindful about how they engage in the process of reflection. Some additional examples of individual and group reflective practice include action inquiry (Torbert, 2004) as well as U-journaling and social presencing theater (Scharmer, 2009). Through the reflective practice of first-person inquiry combined with engaging with others in second-

person and third-person inquiry, I have come to better understand how my own stage of development impacts how I make meaning around learning and facilitating change. Likewise, through the process of reflective first-person inquiry, facilitators of organizational change can attempt to recognize their limitations and push beyond their boundaries, leading to greater possibilities of transformation. Furthermore, by engaging with others in second- and third-person inquiry, facilitators can better understand how their own stage of development impacts the way they approach learning and manage the complexity of leading organizational change.

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