

"The power of pictures" - Cross cultural working in Nepal

We are in Kathmandu, working with the people responsible for delivering psychiatric services in Nepal: administrators, psychiatrists and psychiatric nurses. Guyanu, the Nepalese administrator stands in front of a drawing of Everest. Stick figures are heading for the top, flag in hand. "This one is struggling and being sent home, this one can't make it and is being left behind". She is mapping out the future as perceived by the group of staff who support the medical team. They are aiming high, so woe-betide anyone who can't stand the pace.

In another part of the room, the three senior psychiatrists, Nepalese and English, draw people in a truck being shaken about on a bumpy road. Traffic lights depict stop-go difficulties.



Amid much laughter, the psychiatric nurses draw a couple of horses balefully eyeing the same pile of hay. Not much collaboration there! They are alongside someone trying to keep fifteen balls in the air. Tensions in the group emerge from these drawings. However, the picture includes a sky full of stars so there is a glimmer of optimism for them to work with.

Ian Hall and I have been invited by the United Mission to Nepal (UMN) and the Nepalese government to act as facilitators to the Mental Health Joint Working Group. We are helping them explore the fundamental question "should we be working as a team?" The answer will determine working practice and training after we leave.

Explaining the psychiatrists' picture with "Everest" above

At around 2,300 staff the multi-cultural UMN is the second biggest organisation after the government. The group includes a Finn, a Swede and a German as well as people from England, Wales and Nepal. The Chief Psychiatrist for the government heads a group of Nepalese. Nepali and English are the shared languages, to varying levels of fluency.

As outsiders, we need to put our assumptions on hold and not prejudge the outcome. We require a diagnostic tool that takes account of the different cultures and language. Communication through images crosses language barriers, so we ask for drawings on what it feels like being part of the group and where it is going. Even the shy assistant joins an animated discussion in his small group. Bilingual participants translate on our behalf. Everyone has been encouraged to add his or her view to the larger picture. The good-humoured exploration of the pictures brings out common goals and shared concerns, as well as issues specific to individuals.



The support team decides what is important

Seeing the pictures side by side enables us to compare and share the perceptions of the nurses, psychiatrists and administrators. The images highlight strengths in the group and identify leverage points for change. There are several 'ah-ha' moments as blind spots are illuminated and assumptions challenged. For some issues a simple clarification is enough. Others are deeper and will require more time to resolve. At the end of the day the verdict is unanimous, they want to work as a team. Feedback over the coming months provided evidence of improved working practices and better use of resources.

Developing shared frameworks in a group is a powerful outcome of using pictures. They can also be used to improve communication across an organisation.

Improving communication

In Northern Ireland two groups of young managers working on their personal development draw group pictures of their part of the organisation. Manufacturing's picture is very busy. The most prominent feature is a large black cloud, depicting the pressure of redundancies and continuous change. In contrast, the picture by the support staff is full of energy, people aiming at the sky and a bright future.

The pictures turn out to be a real 'eye opener'. Amazement at the differences leads to a lively dialogue. The result is increased understanding as to why communication between the two areas is not as good as it could be. To bring about change we build a joint project into the development programme that supports shared responsibility for improvements.

Poor communication can take many forms. In some organisations we find there is a 'silo' mentality, with limited communication between departments or sites. People may be expected to communicate upwards across and down, rather than directly with colleagues at a similar level in other areas. This results in many wasted opportunities for learning across business boundaries. In these cases, creating a shared picture at the outset of a change programme can help to break down barriers.

Moving towards a shared culture

A client expressed concern that a year after creating one entity from several different organisations there was little evidence of a shared culture. In addition, many of the new managers were scientists with no management experience. We were given the remit to provide a practical overview of management and help managers understand issues that were blocking the emergence of a common culture. Groups of sixteen managers from across the organisation met for two days. The first activity was to work in a group of eight to make one collage, using a range of materials, to represent each person's perception of the organisation.

The emotional impact of the merger was illustrated in the metaphors created. For example, Group headquarters was drawn with a barbed wire fence round it. In a robust exchange, the Group Development Manager expressed how stressful it was sending information out and getting no response. One group drew everybody's frustrations inside a headless chicken. However, a more positive view emerged when one person explained why he had drawn a lighthouse and sunny future outside the chicken.

The detail in the pictures intrigued people. As the groups explored each other's collage, barriers began to come down as explanations were given for the symbols, colours and other images. The overall pictures captured the rather chaotic feel to the organisation. However, the details helped people home in on specifics that could be tackled. In major change, we find responses to the situation range from a 'can do, this is a great opportunity' attitude to 'it won't work'. Some people assume 'everyone' thinks the same as they do and it can be difficult for them to really listen to alternative views.

When people under pressure describe a situation verbally, particular words can trigger entrenched, 'for' or 'against' attitudes, especially in a win-lose, competitive culture. By contrast, in the collage, many different perspectives are represented. It is as if the personal nature of each contribution makes it easier to see a host of similarities and differences. "It is diversity of views that generates the friction and energy for innovation." (West 2000), The experience can free people from habitual behaviour, encouraging them to step outside the control of organisational structure and rules and take a creative approach to shaping the way forward. After all, Einstein's breakthrough on relativity came from imagining how it would be to 'ride on a light wave'!

How important is the ability to draw?

What happens if people feel they can't draw? Claxton (1997, 1998), suggests that creativity occurs when people feel free from pressure, safe and positive. To help create this climate, we agree rules of confidentiality and reassure people that being an artist is not important - symbols, colours and stick figures are fine, with words as captions or in speech bubbles. With group pictures we make sure that it is a joint effort and discourage "artists" from doing all the drawing. However, it is wonderful how creative individuals can be, with a little encouragement, and many clearly enjoy a different way of working.

Where drawings are not appropriate, maybe due to time constraints or because we feel it will suit the situation better, we work with existing images. People like working with our wide selection of black and white pictures collected over a number of years. Instead of drawing their own picture, individuals select images that mean something to them. They may select a metaphor that represents themselves, their team or their organisation now and another for how they would like it to be. Having fully explored the present and future images, we can then look at how to bridge the gap.

While metaphors and analogies only go part way to describing a situation, sharing their meaning helps to provide common frames of reference, break down barriers and open up dialogue.

Metaphors create insight but they also distort - They have strengths but they also have limitations (Morgan 1993)

Choosing pictures rather than words

Why are pictures often more effective than words?

Words on their own are limiting in being able to show the complexity of the links and relationships in a situation. Some individuals have difficulty describing in words how it is for them. We all project meaning into situations and may assume others think the same. People who work together often develop habitual responses and may not really listen to each other.

Creating pictures by drawing or using other materials such as cut-up magazines is a different means of expression to words. What is important, yet may be out of awareness, can come through in the images colours, shapes, angularity, roundness, etc. A picture can unlock truths around the feelings and emotions that influence, and often block, a situation. In our experience, pictures draw in the "artist" and other people. As it is often not obvious what a picture means, their interest and intrigue encourages them to ask questions.

Conclusion

There is a wealth of high-tech and leading edge development activities around. It is easy to forget simple tools that can help to diagnose a situation and act as a catalyst for change. Dialoguing around images is a powerful way to enhance the use of words. While images and metaphors can never explain everything, nor can dialogue. However, their combination can help break down habitual filters and blocks and establish links that can point the way forward.

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