

Joining forces to breathe air into a demotivated team

Introduction :

Often when we think of minority cultures, we tend to think of cultural communities in the anthropological sense and tend to overlook the phenomenon of minority cultures in the corporate world.

As a narrative coach, I was asked to be part of a team coaching intervention for a team of managers from a company that had recently been bought by another. The Director of Human Resources had sought help for this once dynamic and highly motivated team of managers whose energies were being sapped by frustration, disillusionment, anger and demotivation since the merger.

Action

The group of European managers from New Visions¹ is depressed, frustrated, angry... They have been bought by a larger pharmaceutical company 18 months ago, and, although initially positive and excited by this merger that infused them with needed financial resources, they are presently quite discouraged and their DHR has arranged for them to be coached as a team.

Bolder², a group of coaches and consultants, has been hired to work with them for a week; Mission: re motivation and re energizing.

I have been asked to work for a day with Bolder to find a way to weave together the Narrative Approach and their model of "Tri-functionality"

It is an interesting challenge, the Narrative Approach working side by side with a very different approach, a model that asks people to define themselves and characterize their business through 3 different modes of functioning and three different modalities.

My partner, Pierre, is a bit sceptical at the notion of joining two such dissimilar working modes, but I know I have already found narrative ways of working with the "Golden" , a type of personality inventory, only for individuals. In any case, I'm open to trying. So, by phone and by mail and in person, my co-presenter, Charles, we construct a plan for the day.

We decide to do his part first and mine second, he says," head first, heart second". I don't know that I would characterize Narrative as " heart", but that's ok. I'm into being adaptable and that seems like a good idea. I'm the outsider, the new kid on the block, and quite willing to be adaptable and follow his lead. It seems like a good plan for me, as it allows me to weave in the Narrative Approach and orient my afternoon with the material that comes out in the morning's session.

I know already that through this merger, a highly motivated team has become frustrated and demotivated. This tells me that there is, behind the frustration and the problem story that has been growing since the merger, a preferred story and a preferred identity with which they are having trouble finding how to stay connected.

I have decided that I will do a *retelling* (documentation based on their words) at the beginning of my afternoon session based on whatever comes out in their sharing in the morning,

^{1 1} The names of all the businesses have been changed to respect confidentiality

² *ibid*

especially as I know they are going to be doing a collage on the team, "who we are and how we work". This idea of a "retelling" is to provide them with a creative reflection of the words I have heard in what they share about their collages that speak to this "preferred identity" - one that represents their shared hopes, values, missions and visions for their work. In order to open the door to their re- uniting around this identity and generating ideas for themselves in accord with this identity.

As we are supposed to give the client a plan for the day, I decide for the afternoon on a "classic" Narrative Approach that I often use with teams, one that helps them connect with preferred identity stories, and from this departure point generate collaboratively initiatives that will be in accord with this identity. I will invite them tell stories on a theme- (for example successes, moments they felt good in the team...), then invite them to deconstruct together the relevant factors that made their success possible, and look at the values involved: "What does this story say about what is important to them?*"

What I don't know is where they will be at the end of the morning. Where will the *profiling* take them? How will we make bridges? What will my point of entry be? What would the best point of entry be?

I am clear on the fact of making my final decision concerning the focus of my afternoon after I see which way the wind blows in the morning, and I'm still open to modifying. At lunch the day before, I have the DHR on the phone who wants a detailed plan and wants to understand how my approach will work. As we talk on the phone, I sense she is not reassured. I reassure her as best I can, telling her I will eat lunch with Fabienne, the person who works with them the following day, in order to be sure that my intervention will segue well into hers.

I explain the intentions of the narrative intervention as well as some of the theoretical bases behind the idea of "managing change" through the Narrative Approach. This is what I plan for, I'm just not 100% sure of my entry point. I explain to her the concept that we create our identities through the stories we tell. The idea that when a team is demotivated and frustrated, the fact that *Demotivation* exists indicates that they have known the experience of being a *motivated* team; that when, in a team coaching session, we help them re-connect with this motivated, preferred, identity, through finding and sharing stories of team motivation and success, we observe that they also connect with positive group energy and excitement. This positive energy can then be used to create and explore initiatives that will assist them in staying connected with this preferred identity and with the energy it brings, and thus serving to help re-motivate

Pierre is dubitative, how can you do this intervention without working with Stronger (the company that bought them), as well? But the client doesn't want that. I meet with my interface at Bolder, Christine; she shares her concerns and her knowledge of the client. She thinks the Narrative Approach should go first, but on that point I'm not convinced. I like the idea of going in the afternoon, of working with what has already emerged in terms of identity, and of being able to close the day around intentions and possible initiatives that might emerge from bringing forth stories of their preferred identities. In any case we agree that it will probably be best to ask them to share a few stories about times when they overcame a difficult situation or challenge collectively...

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Having just spent three days translating for David Epston in the workshop he gave over here in France, I'm in my own personal "preferred" story, the one that includes crossing the Atlantic in a sailboat, the one where all I have to do in order to do a good job is be 100% present and

respond to what the client is expressing. After the three days of 100% presence while translating from English to French for David, I realized I wasn't very tired at the end of the day. This helped me understand that what tired me out in giving trainings was trying to deal with Perfectionism's critical voice, it was my internal dialogue. So with this awareness, I made a deal with myself that I would do my group interventions in the same way, trusting my abilities to be responsive to what was going on for the group and sending the inner critical voices away.

So...I'm still not 100% sure of exactly what I will be doing when, on Thursday morning, I arrive at their offices where the training is taking place. It's on a houseboat on the Seine and this helps. As I step on the gangway, the sun rising over the Seine and the Parisian buildings in the background, I take a deep breath and allow myself to connect to the energy I feel on the water, to a personal preferred story. Charles and I are also participating in the introductions he has devised and each person needs to say something no one knows about themselves; I say that I arrived in France on a sailboat. I have a feeling that this part of my preferred alternative story will be useful to me in bringing forth energy to deal with the challenges of the day. So I showed up, took copious notes during the morning session, and trusted I would know the right entry point as it emerged.

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They started the morning with collages...a lot of energy in those collages: images like matadors, strange teams, exhausted people....

For the restitution I'm taking furious notes. I realize that it's rapidly becoming a session not only about their identities, but a lot to do with their relationship with the dominant* story of the problems they are having with Stronger.

This is not at all surprising. Often, when a company is purchased by another, they are expected to "integrate" into the purchasing company's culture. As with all power imbalances, there is a dominant culture (the purchaser) who assumes that their culture is the best and makes either token or no efforts to understand the minority (purchased) culture or become interested in what this culture might have to offer them.

In our plans with Charles we wanted to avoid "Stronger bashing" but these frustrations apparently need to come out. So, at the debriefing of the collages, mid-morning, rather than take a more back seat role for this part I move in front to stand with Charles and we work together on this to help move beyond the complaints and Stronger bashing to get to a vision of their resistances behind the complaints, their hopes and their resources.

I throw out few questions to bring in a different focus, and though they don't get answered they do get their attention.

-What are your hopes for this seminar?(we could have started with this and if I were doing a totally Narrative day on my own I would have posed the question in the morning...)

-One of the important words that emerged this morning was "team work", what are your hopes, your desires for your team?

-What do you think we would see if your team were able to work well together?...how would we recognize this? What would be present?

Seeds planted, questions not yet answered, but considered... I can see that they are considering alternatives to their frustrated feeling of powerlessness.

At one point Charles and I look at each other and agree it is time to introduce the *Trifunctionality*³ model, to change focus. This gives them a chance to get some distance, and to refocus on their own team again...

So I turn the morning back over to Charles, and go back to taking notes for my retelling.

This takes them until lunchtime, with a mini focus on Stronger but nothing too much.

I have lots more fuel for my retelling.

After lunch, I change the seating; no more tables; they all sit in a circle.

I do this to facilitate interactions between them and to take myself out of the "expert" role. This elicits the usual remarks, even though they seem happy to change format. " Ah, group therapy, ... Hello my name is Ben and I have a problem with alcohol "...

I explain the Narrative Approach, they' re not yet sold, I can see. I explain identity- making through the stories we tell about our lived experiences, about how the connecting of the actions we do with elements of our preferred identity (values, dreams, hopes, missions) helps create meaning for our lives..., I'm getting ready to go into *captain holding the helm against the wind as it starts to scream in the sails* mode. I know humour works well with them, and I also sense the post-prandial slump, always fairly pronounced in France as the food is always good, (at least today there was no wine).

So we go into a playful mode around a possible energizing game that I might propose. This allows them to " negotiate', refuse the game, and "contest my authority" while asserting their authorship, and we' re off to a good start. This in itself also energizes them.

We sit down and I read my retelling. I have no idea how it will be received....

Blossoming as a team

Here is how we feel about where we came from:

We are the people between the old and the new

The umbrella and the shield

The mask: we filter between our difficulties and our customers

The samurai, terribly professional, old...

We feel we are high class,

Cuddly, cute, passionate

And professional

We want to be a role model,

But there's so much we cannot see

We' ve become reactive rather than proactive

We' d like to see if we can do something about that.

We are like a rowing boat

We are really proud as a team

³ *Trifunctionality. Is a model that allows the teams to bring to light three key functions and their interactions for the group, warrior, producer, and sovereign. The model allows them to look with some distance at their way of functioning, on what is important to them, and eventually, on Stronger's functioning mode and the differences between them.

We like our team spirit

We have to adapt to them
With the "French girl touch"
Blossoming as a team

We have to create our own visions

We believe in similar values
Helping to save people's lives
Philanthropy, passionate about our work,
We have created a culture that
Is friendly and all encompassing
We enjoy being part of a family.

We need to figure out how to deal with the situation.
We are in charge of our teams
We would like to infuse a different culture in our teams
Individuals take responsibility for the teams

The matador, the mask,
Relationships first of all..
It starts with colleagues, then customers,

We created and helped create Newvisions.
We think our natural place is number one.
We are at least 120% committed to what we do.

We are between the old and the new
How can we come together
As matadors, samurais, masks and shields?
Blossoming as a team...

... Silence... Clapping... I hear a "wow".

Nothing but their words, a reflecting surface, it worked.

Then I propose my questions. The first part is individual questions, to think about and write on their own.

1. Could you think of one or two stories of times when you were able to successfully overcome a difficult challenge or help a colleague successfully overcome a difficult situation?(it can be big or small, technical, interpersonal, or very private that no one else even saw...)
2. What were the factors that went into making this possible, the factors involved?(before, during, after effects; this can include answering the questions of how you did it, who helped, what resources you used, what was your frame of mind, timing...)
3. What does this story tell us about what is important to you? What meaning could you give it?

I can see they are a bit slow in starting, sceptical perhaps still, but slowly the writing starts.

Then, the sharing together in the group. The stories start coming. Ben, Karin, Helene, fast and furious the group process is starting to get into the process.

I'm noting on the flip charts , a collaborative thinking processes:

- Chart number one: what factors went into making this a success story?
- Chart number 2: what does the story say about what is important to you?

Ben tells a story where he had struggled for months to get payment for a consultant and had run into an administrative blockage. His story involved a struggle through emails and "networking as much as possible" to finally arrive at his goal.

Keeping customers, customer first, saving time...

Karin' s concerned a sales rep that was not doing well, she knew something was not right, her boss said to fire him, but she made a decision together with her team based on her desire to take care of the people working for her, and they came up with a plan to help him recover. Following him closely, two years later he was awarded the award for the best sales rep.

I write on the paper board what she says concerning: "what this says about what is important to me", and her colleagues contribute :

- My integrity
- Value for people despite pressure
- Giving everyone as a chance
- I see self as a mirror, others contribute
- Believing everyone has the ability
- Giving everyone a chance.

Elena volunteers a story concerning a complicated scheduling of an event that already didn't fit into the " Stronger box", but she managed to get the ok, and just as the event is supposed to be happening, the Iceland volcano erupts causing a flight ban on all of Europe. So she found herself doing complicated negotiating with restaurants, finding different dates before communicating with customers, and throughout all of this finding the endurance to do all the planning all over again; the feeling of success when she pulled it off.

The elements that emerge about what's important:

- Nothing is impossible,
- Discuss with others about difficult situations.
- " If we survived the volcano, we can survive anything "

A whole list of contributing factors has emerged through these three stories:

- Played on the strength of the team,
- Luck
- Faith
- Strong will to succeed
- As " captain of the team", kept a cool mind
- Let's make the best of what we've got
- Convincing
- Motivating
- Customer focus
- Audacity
- Courageous
- Brave
- " Warrior"

I'm feeling energized with the contact with these stories, I can feel the group energized, they are sitting up, leaning forward, listening intently to each other, contributing to the flip charts. Their "factors" all speak to the preferred story they had had for years before the merger. Which could, of course, be a fine line...

I'm just wondering whether to ask for another story when the youngest member, Giovanni, who hadn't even written anything down says, "if we have time I have another small story." Of course we have time....I actually hadn't been sure he had done the exercise, he hadn't written anything, so I was definitely going to give him time.

A wonderful story emerges, a *bridge story* when he actually got proactive in relation to Stronger processes and the experience of being caught in the middle between the two worlds that they all felt they were in.

Giovanni's story is a captivating one, at the heart of their frustrations caught between potential customers (doctors) and this new administrative heaviness, "compliance", that they had all been complaining about. He had to negotiate between doctors wanting a hotel with a swimming pool for their conference and "compliance" that didn't want to give much of anything. So he put things on the table with both sides and organized a meeting between representatives of both parties. As he said he didn't want to be "filtering". And he didn't want to lose credibility. The meeting hadn't happened yet and we were all interested in his story and its eventual outcome. It illustrated all their frustrations.

Filling the paperboards through a collaborative effort:

What this says about what's important to us:

- Believing,
- Customer focus,
- Training doctors, too,
- Making a junction,
- It goes in both directions, we can have an influence on Stronger.

The factors that came into play:

- Passion
- Creating a bridge,
- Calling on Stronger to show up,
- Accountability and communication,
- Connecting,
- Discussing,
- Creating understanding,
- Being proactive,
- Business focus / priorities,
- Communication and education.

After this, time for a break, the energy has changed. ...it is palpable.

After the break we break the group into 2 groups; I still feel I'm holding the helm against a stiff force 5-6 wind, but it is no longer gale force. We divide into 2 small groups; each group will address the 2 questions:

1. Concrete initiatives that could come out of the day
2. What would you like to communicate in the debriefing at the end of the day with your superiors?

I propose 40 minutes for this and we reassemble after their 40 minutes.

Surprise! The first group has a flip chart full of initiatives. Concrete ideas.

Group 2 says, we have just one idea...it is to actually embark together on a collective project. We suggest working together on the incentive plan.

All it would mean is for the next session here in December we arrive early on the 4th and use that day; we would have to get a room at the hotel to meet.

Every one is in agreement!

One person volunteers to go to rent the room.

Then as we watch, a little hitch... Do we include "Alex" the accounting specialist or not? I can see the group faltering with this little challenge.

But it moves on...after a long discussion.

I'm a bit worried about time, they aren't leaving any time for the second question. They don't seem concerned. When I finally get them to look at that question, I find out why... Both groups have the same answer: they want to read my re-telling document!

Part Two:

Debriefing with the actors. 3 months later.

At my request we held a conference call with the H R director of NV, the consultant who followed my intervention, and the project manager from Bolder whose idea it was to include narrative ideas.

My intentions were to find out the effects of the Narrative Approach on the team and on their re-motivation over time.

One of the first things that the Human Resource Director said that really struck me was that the management was surprised at the appearance of a true team spirit. " Since they participated in the seminar, they keep coming forward with propositions!" he had complained. Her sense was that their management had not themselves been prepared ahead of time and could therefore neither comprehend the results nor the sense of re-motivation that the team had found.

This was an important point that we picked up on immediately. This team's culture is a minority culture within the dominant Stronger culture who neither shared nor understood their mode of functioning nor their values. This alternative and preferred story and identity, was in danger of losing the advantages they had gained through the training for a number of reasons.

Representatives of the dominant culture, our requests notwithstanding, had not been included in the framework of the intervention. They had been neither actors in the process, nor witnesses or audiences to the story, nor had they been briefed beforehand. If we had reconnected the team with their preferred story, this story could not keep up its strength without being heard by a wider audience.

The story also needed its club. It needed other people in the organization to help keep it alive.

We heard that key members of the team were leaving it, either for other positions in the organization, or in one case, for a job with a "competing" firm. The HR director was understandably concerned.

It was not surprising, we told her: the emerging preferred story was still fragile and needed reinforcement. We saw two areas to work on: working with the team in a more on-going manner and a meeting with the Director, who was still sceptical about the approach, but never officially briefed on it. We wanted him for an ally of their alternative story.

We proposed to work out a manner to do on-going work with the team through a series of meetings via conference call. A narrative protocol that would allow these members of the team from 8-10 European countries to continue to work together in an team-coaching framework.

Story to be continued as it is in the works. ...