

Organisational Change, Leadership, Coaching, and the Creation of Holding Environments at Work

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Introduction

During times of organisational change, leaders perform the leadership behaviours of creating vision and mission, establishing goals and objectives, motivating, challenging, empowering and inspiring others, providing resources, aligning people's efforts with one another and using reward, information management, and hierarchical systems (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). However, leaders, managers, organisational consultants and coaches must also be aware of another layer of organisational activity. They must understand and manage the emotions that are inevitably aroused by change (French, 2001). During times of organisational change, individuals may fear the loss of their job. Individuals may have anxiety about the loss of known ways of working. Employees may be asked to take new risks, generating uncertainty and fear of failure. Individuals may become concerned that the meaning that their work had for them, which may have been aligned with their beliefs and values, will change as a result of organisational change. (Hoyle, 2004). The anxiety evoked by the process of change can be a major barrier to implementing successful change. In fact, this is the central tenet of the psychoanalytic theory of the sources of resistance to change.

So, how then can leaders, managers, coaches and organisational consultants understand and manage the emotions aroused in organisational members so as to more successfully implement change interventions. This article explores the topic of creating *holding environments* at work as a way of understanding and managing these emotions. The article is divided into three main sections. The first section talks about the development of the idea of "holding" from a psychoanalytic perspective. Secondly, the article explores the creation of holding environments in organisations and their impact during times of organisational change. Finally we discuss the development of Leaders as Competent "Holders" in

Organisations, and how coaching can help leaders facilitate the creation of holding environments at work.

The idea of “Holding” Environments

The original concept of the holding environment was developed by British Psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (1965). Winnicott (1964) was concerned with the mother’s relation to her baby just before the birth and in the first weeks and months after the birth. He drew “attention to the immense contributions to the individual and to society which the ordinary good mother with her husband in support makes at the beginning, and which she does simply through being devoted to her infant” (p. 10). Winnicott held that this template relationship laid “the foundation for the child’s personality and emotional development, and his capacity to withstand the frustrations and shocks that sooner or later came his way” (p. 21). Therefore, the child’s ability to handle “the difficulties of life” is founded upon the original experience of being securely held (Balint, 1968; Kohut, 1977; Winnicott, 1965).

Winnicott’s theories were quickly developed and applied to groups and organisations. In talking about the creation of a safe, reliable environment, Bion (1961), who wrote about his experience of working with Groups, used the term “containment” to describe the creation of a safe, reliable environment to enable groups to perform at a high level. Central throughout Bion’s work is the concept of projective identification (Klein, 1946). Projective Identification is a process whereby individuals unconsciously offload their states of mind onto others. For example, an individual may have anxieties that they themselves may not be able to bear, and therefore the anxieties are split off and projected into others. They do so in the unconscious wish to be rid of their own anxiety. The individual also unconsciously wishes for someone to contain, digest, reflect on, and offer back their experiences in ways that they too can digest and work with (Bion, 1962; Klein, 1959; Mawson, 1994; Shapiro & Carr, 1991). This dynamic, which is rooted in the individual’s early life experience has a tendency to replicate itself later on in the adults subjective experience *and* behaviour when working in groups and organisations.

Winnicott and others further used the holding environment concept to describe the psychoanalytic setting (Balint, 1954; Modell, 1976; Winnicott, 1965). The psychoanalyst

creates the holding environment through unwavering attentiveness to the client's experiences, needs, and development; by facilitating the client's arriving at her or his own insights; by containing/holding the client's anxieties and by offering empathic interpretations (Balint, 1954; Modell, 1976; Winnicott, 1965).

How can we transfer the concepts of holding and containment which were developed by Winnicott, Bion and others, to the idea of understanding and managing emotions in Organisations during times of stress and change? Why is it important for leaders, coaches and organisational change consultants to have an understanding of these concepts?

To answer these questions, we need firstly to have an understanding of the idea of attachment. In particular how patterns of attachment which begin in infancy, tend to continue operating throughout our lives. It is a central tenet of the psychodynamic approach to coaching and organisational change, that these ingrained patterns will impact on the individuals organisational life; irrespective of what level of responsibility the individual holds in the organisation; from director level to operative.

Building on Bowlby's work, Ainsworth, Bell, and Stayton (1971), identified three attachment patterns: **Secure attachment** is one in which the active involvement of the parent and the parent's sensitivity, responsiveness, predictability, and consistency given the child a "secure base" (Ainsworth, 1982), from which he/she can take the risks necessary for exploration and play. **Insecure avoidant attachment** is one where the children have been turned away or rejected when they look for care from their attachment figure, so they have learnt that it is better not to attach to anyone. They minimise their attachment needs and keep to themselves. **Insecure ambivalent attachment**, is one where parents have sometimes been available and responsive and sometimes not. There will often have been separations and the use of threats of abandonment. Insecurely ambivalent children are always anxious about separation and, in contrast to insecure avoidant children, tend to cling to their attachment figure. A fourth attachment pattern was subsequently identified by Main and Solomon (1986) called **insecure disorganised attachment**. In the insecure disorganised attachment pattern, there is no clear pattern of parent/child interaction; the child struggles to hold on to a sense of its own psychological integrity, being unsure of where its boundaries lie.

Patterns of attachment therefore fundamentally affect the development of the personality. These patterns are maintained by internalized models that generally operate out of awareness and resist change (Bowlby, 1980; Weiss, 1982). So unless people become aware of their models through feedback and have different experiences in their post childhood attachments, their childhood-derived patterns will continue to shape their relationships (Greenspan & Lieberman, 1988) both outside and inside their lives in organisations.

In two recent studies, one in a residential care centre for adults with disabilities and the other in a high street bank, Hoyle (2004) found that groups of staff and the senior management team demonstrated different responses to change. She pointed out that the different responses to change were represented on a continuum ranging from “**sycophant**” response, “**positive and challenging**” response, “**negative and challenging**” response, to “**saboteur**” response. The term “sycophant” response is used to describe a response to change that can be seen as an unthinking and unchallenging state of followership. In both case studies, the behaviour of the senior management could be categorised as a sycophant response to change. The senior management were responsible for managing the implementation of the changes and were in full agreement with the proposed changes. The senior management seemed to push through the changes regardless of what impact the changes would have on staff. It may have been that their behaviour served as a defence against anxiety and a source of the anxiety was the fear that the change programme would not be successfully implemented, which could jeopardize their career progression.

Organisational members that had the positive and challenging response represented positive support for the changes and offered constructive challenge. They thought through how they could influence the content of the changes and help with the implementation. Group members who represented the negative and challenging response to change were against the changes in principle and offered reasons why they disagreed fundamentally with the proposals. Hoyle (2004) used the term “saboteur” to describe a response to change where individuals or groups unconsciously attempted to sabotage a change. The sabotage response included outward displays of sabotage, such as disruption of the discussion groups, to passive forms such as non-participation in the consultation process. One extreme sabotage response came from a woman who was extremely anxious about potentially losing her job. The two extreme responses, the sycophant and the saboteur, are similar in that the source of resistance

seemed to be that people expressed anxiety based on fear for their personal survival in the organisation.

When reflecting further on this study, and thinking about holding environments at work, what is most interesting is that, in the early stages of the bank change project, some people had a negative and challenging response to change, but, when the Director blocked them from voicing their concerns, they developed a more extreme saboteur response to change. (Hoyle, 2004). In other words, these people moved along the continuum from a negative and challenging response to change to a saboteur response to change because they were not able to voice their concerns. In contrast, the people in the health service case study that had a negative and challenging response to change maintained that response, rather than becoming saboteurs, because they were given the opportunity to voice their concerns and opposition to the proposed changes during a consultation process. Hoyle (2004) points out that this evidence demonstrates the impact of the interpersonal relationships and interactions on responses to change, and that when employees are listened to and their concerns taken seriously, it reduces the impact of an extreme sabotage response to the change.

So, just as children need to feel secure enough in their family, in order to get on with their developmental tasks, adults need to feel secure enough in their roles and organisation in order to work productively (Braun, 2011). Braun (2011) says that we all bring to our organisations our attachment patterns: these become part of what happens unconsciously between people. “Our attachment patterns have a profound effect on our sense of security and capacity for trust, which then shapes our responses to others and our environment” (pg 123). She points out that “such security is difficult to achieve now as organisations are affected by the acute insecurity of the wider environment; employers have become increasingly transactional in their dealings with employees; technology reduces the need for personal interaction and physical space defining an organisation is less tangible” (pg 123). Understanding attachment theory helps leaders create an environment that supports engagement and development where individuals, teams and the whole workplace can flourish. In her forthcoming book, Braun (1) links attachment theory with employee engagement. Specifically, if leaders work in ways that are known to encourage “secure attachment” they can optimise the environment and promote in-depth, meaningful and sustainable engagement. Strong leadership throughout the

organisation would therefore mean creating an atmosphere in which robust and difficult conversations can take place so that holding people to account is possible and relationships are deepened.

The Development of Leaders, Coaches, and Organisational Change Consultants as Competent “Holders” in Organisations.

So, how can leaders become competent “holders”, and what might help them to facilitate the creation of holding environments at work? To be a good emotional container, leaders need to have ways to contain and reduce their own anxiety. The leader needs to develop a “non-anxious presence” (Friedman, 1985). Leadership development might benefit from incorporating insights from two areas of practical research (Bushe & Marshak, 2016). One is somatic psychotherapy, also referred to as body-orientated psychotherapy, which works with breathing and muscles to access awareness of and release sources of anxiety (e.g. Macnaughton, 2004). The other is mindfulness (e.g. Siegel, 2011), a process rooted in Buddhist meditation practices now receiving widespread attention because neuroscientists have found it effectively reduces stress and anxiety (Tang, Hoizel, & Posner, 2015).

However, Kahn & Kram (1994) points out that when individuals experience enough anxiety to make them feel insecure in their immediate situations, their internal models are triggered. This will often happen during times of organisational change. Attachment theorists (Bowlby, 1980; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986) emphasize that changing early attachment is difficult because such models operate out of immediate awareness, resist change, and defend against emotional pain. The less that people are aware of their internal models, the less they are able to alter actions that derive from these models. Kahn & Kram (1994) points out that changing internal models is a two-stage process consisting of developing awareness of one’s patterns of thought and behaviour (and to varying extents the psychological defences used to maintain them) and developing new ways of relating with others. It is a difficult thing for a leader to do. The process involves reflecting on and discussing their emotional availability as an attachment figure and the impact both of these have on attachment and engagement in their organisation. Not only does it require time to reflect on and increase one’s self-awareness, but it also touches the personal within the professional role (2).

A Psychodynamic Model of Coaching can help leaders to become more self aware and they can begin to understand the unconscious reasons behind their behaviour as leaders (Bell & Huffington (2008). While leaders and managers will often come to Coaching to help them bring about external (behavioural change), the primary focus of the psychodynamic approach to coaching focuses on internal change (insight) as a way of bringing about the desired behavioural change (Roberts & Jarrett, 2006). Sandler (2011), in her psychodynamic-influenced coaching strategies and techniques says that she listens carefully to her clients as they talk about their work. She empathises. Sometimes she explores urgent steps that need to be taken. However, she is keen to move the focus in due course to what the client's own contribution has been to the situation that they find themselves in. She points out that holding the clients' need for psychological safety is central to her practice, and she strives to avoid triggering defensive reactions. She invites her coaching clients to develop their ability to tune into their emotional state, to become more sensitive to what is going on below the surface, and to stop and think before they respond automatically to a situation in the workplace. Only by surfacing and challenging the unconscious defensive pattern can the leader be confident of not repeating the same behaviour again the next time they feel anxious. In addition, it is important for the client to become "more tolerant and accepting of what they experience as disappointing or shameful aspect of themselves" (Sandler, 2011, pg 72), so the coaching can "continually foster a subtle but significant shift in their relationship with themselves" (pg 72).

As well as leaders looking at how they unconsciously have internal models based on their earlier parent-infant relationship, systems psychodynamic coaching will also invite the leader to become sensitive to the organisational dynamics that can influence and interfere with their leadership task (Bell & Huffington, 2008). An individual in an organisation is influenced by the group dynamics of which he or she is a member (Bion, 1961), by the relationships that exist between the different groups in the organisation (Alderfer, 1980, 1987), and also by the norms within the organisation as a whole (Schein, 1985). As leaders develop their own self-awareness through the process of coaching, they can begin to understand what belongs to them and what belongs to the Organisation to which they belong. The leader will then be better positioned to work at resistance to change within the organisation by seeking to understand the anxieties that it represents and attempting to address these in a constructive manner (Bell & Huffington, 2008).

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, during times of organisational change, leaders and managers, must understand and manage the emotions that are inevitably aroused by change (French, 2001). Holding environments at work are interpersonal or group-based relationships that enable self-reliant workers to manage situations that trigger potentially debilitating anxiety (Kahn, 2001). If leaders and managers are to help create holding environments at work, they must reflect on their own patterns of attachments derived from parent-child relations (Bowlby, 1980) which sometimes operate out of awareness and resist change. Somatic psychotherapy (e.g. Macnaughton, 2004) and mindfulness (e.g. Siegal, 2011) will help the leader to create a “non-anxious presence” (Friedman, 1985); psychodynamic coaching offers an intervention where the leader can gain insight into their own internal models, and the leader may also internalize the “secure base” provided by the organisational consultant at work.

Notes

1. “What have love, aggression, Oedipus and all that got to do with leadership?”
2. Blog on Braun’s Work on Attachment: <http://www.fetl.org.uk/blog/think-piece-leadership-of-thinking-whats-attachment-got-to-to-with-it/>

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