N1073 MANAGING CHANGE

Change Management Proposal: Arrested Politics

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Contents

I.   Introduction

This report proposes a change management plan for the determination and application of a set of codified Rules for the official Discord server of the podcast Arrested Politics, hosted by Alistair Shambles and Rory Newark, to which premium subscribers have access. There are almost 2000 members of the Discord server from which three moderators have been selected by the single server owner who is a producer of the podcast show. Of the 2000 members activity is seen from around 20-30 members on a rotating basis in a given month. The recent developments in the conflict seen in Israel and Palestine has led to a deterioration in discussion and behaviour on the text-only Discord server. The enforcement actions moderators can take are: time-out the offending member for 1 to 7 days, or submit a ban review for the offending member to the server Owner. This has prompted the moderation team and Owner to decide how the organisation would be best served in tackling this problem going forwards, while the situation in Israel and Palestine shows no signs of resolving. They have decided to establish a set of ground rules for server members to abide by. The moderation team believes this will (1) make moderation efforts easier to enforce with a tangible artifact to reference, and (2) hope the presence of codified rules will lead to improved behaviour by establishing norms.

II.   Initial Analysis

While the Owner operates under a Flux and Change approach to change, facilitating and supporting others in his leadership role with the perspective that the end state of the organisation is unknown. The nature and end state of this particular change is known and consists of two parts: deciding upon a set of rules, and deciding upon the application of those rules. The end state is an organisation with a set of rules that codify the dominant and most desirable norms. Therefore, a planned approach to change is appropriate in this case. Analysis of this change presents the Organismal metaphor as the most appropriate. This change is an example of an organisation responding and changing to fit to the external environment, requiring all parts to adjust to retain co-ordination and coherence. The facilitative leadership style of the Owner also supports use of this metaphor. This metaphor also helps to explain the tensions present within the organisation which need to be managed to remain in alignment with the brand as a whole (Table 1). The main strategic challenge the Discord Server faces is trying to replicate a similar ethos and tone to the Podcast Show and simultaneously being different in form and function.

One key descriptor of the organisation is the two different modes which members in the organisation operate in. The day-to-day activities of regular members (ie political discussion on timely news items) are removed from the strategic management decisions. Kotter's Dual Operating System approach is a clear match (Cameron & Green, 2019). However, as laid out in section II.A. Field Theory of this report there are several obstacles to using this approach. The main difficulty this report cites for discarding Kotter's approach is that while there may be felt need for change, deciding upon rules of conduct and how to apply them is not an appealing or popular big opportunity that draws interest for members to volunteer their time and effort. This is supported by the Owner's attempts to recruit more moderators so far being unsuccessful.

Area of tension	Podcast Show	Discord Server
Purpose	Left-Right dialogue Find common ground Respect disagreements	Facilitate discussion for premium podcast subscribers
Discussion Tone	Robust, Professional, Respectful, Sometimes playful	Direct, challenging, Wayward, Pandering, Highly interpretive and subjective
Discussion Format	1-to-1 Often physical in-person Synchronous	Sometimes 1-to-1, Often 1-to-many or many-to-many Online Synchronous and asynchronous
Participant relations	Friendship, respectful, Tactful	Acquaintance, Strained, Superficial, Contentious, Schismatic

Table 1: A list of some areas of tension between the Podcast Show and Discord Server which affect congruence within the larger brand IP.

There are two sub-cultures present in the organisations. These are informed by an array of factors: existing norms of the organisation inform the culture, as well as norms brought in by members through expectations and past experiences of other social media platforms and debate panel shows. Those underlying assumptions influence the culture of the organisation. Regular members experience a Person Culture is described by low concentration of power and low formalisation (Handy, 1999) & (Harrison, 1972). The culture revolves around individuals with emphasis on personal responsibility and is centred on values. Individuals argue their political positions based on their values, revealing only slivers of their identity at their discretion. This is in contrast to the Power Culture of the moderation team: power is highly centralised and formalisation is only slightly increased by virtue of having a recognisable moderator label affixed to their username. Decisions are consequential and made by consensus so moderators must appeal to one another and the Owner. The result is differentiated sub-cultures within the organisation (Figure 1.1 and 1.2).
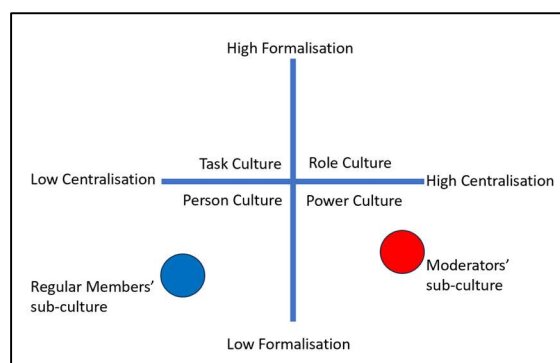

Figure 1.1: The Regular Members' sub-culture and Moderators' sub-culture is mainly differentiated by the difference in centralisation and impact that has on their proximity to power.
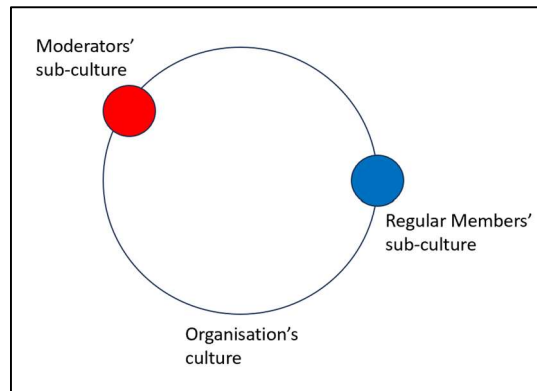
Figure 1.2: The differentiated sub-cultures within the organisation share some commonality; sometimes they are aligned but other times are in contradistinction.

III.   Proposed Change Plan

This report considers Lewin's three-step model as an appropriate framework to plan this change. The model also uses the organismal metaphor for change (Cameron & Green, 2019). Lewin's approach includes four interrelated parts, each of which is covered in the following sections.

A.   Field Theory

Field Theory is a way of mapping the forces applied to a group, resulting in the status quo of current group behaviour. In this case, three driving forces and three restraining forces have been identified (Figure 2) and elaborated upon below.
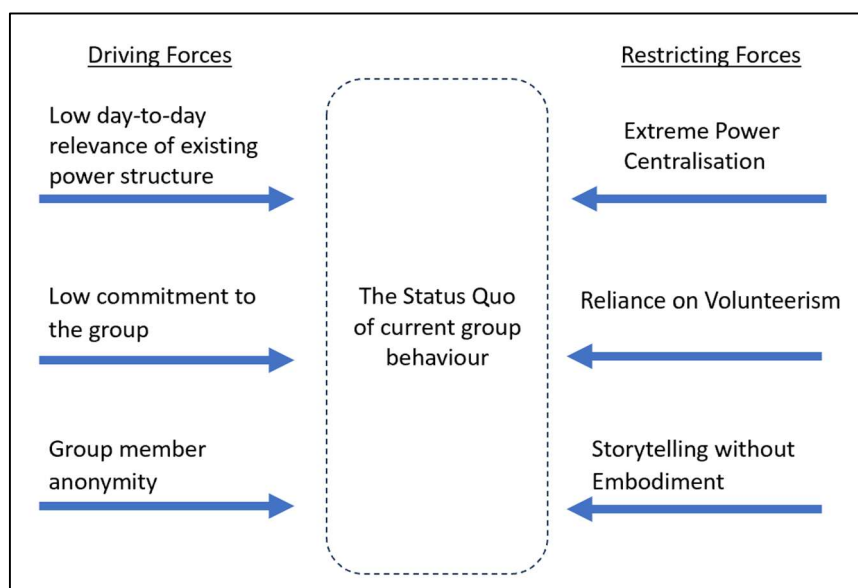

Figure 2: Force Field Analysis of the Arrested Politics Discord Server.

1. Low day-to-day relevance of existing power structure

The day-to-day activities for the vast number of members in the organisation (text discussion with other members) don't rely upon or interact with the existing power structure This results in a perceived low relevance for change by those members since there is no urgent pressing need.

2. Low commitment to the group

The organisation is a low commitment group. Premium subscription (which entitles one to membership) is low cost of £3.50 per month, and there is no reason or extrinsic incentive given for members to re-engage if they decide to stop participating.

3. Group member Anonymity

The nature of Discord as a platform affords members anonymity, allowing them to post messages under a pseudonymous username. This reduces the scope for building relationships and group cohesion as similarities in identity or characteristics are unknown or at the least more difficult to uncover.

4. Extreme Power Centralisation

The power to make change in the organisation resides with 0.2% of the people within it. This extreme power centralisation is highly restrictive and prevents flexible, innovative, or creative solutions from emerging as they cannot be implemented or granted legitimacy without the Owner.

5. Reliance on Volunteerism

This change requires planning, which relies upon volunteers to take on additional work and responsibilities in addition to those in their personal and professional lives. The expectations set upon volunteers by the Owner are very lax: each moderator can decide upon their level of commitment. Combined with the very low number of moderators, this is especially restrictive to change.

6. Storytelling without Embodiment

A key tool in managing and effecting change is using storytelling for political means to establish legitimate and normative power (Buchanan & Badham, 2008). For storytelling to be effective, the target audience must relate to and identify with the future described. The effect of posting anonymously under pseudonyms means that any story told lacks the identity of the storyteller who would serve as an embodiment of the story. Members' desire and ability to hide their identity and a Person culture being centred upon the individual are at odds.

B.   Group Dynamics

In order to create 'disequilibrium' (Schein, 1988) Lewin argued that group behaviour should be the main focus of a change, as individuals are constrained by group pressure to conform (Burnes, 2017). Changing the forces described in section II.A. Field Theory 'unfreezes' the organisation and allows status quo to be changed.

1.   Improve relevance of existing power structure with day-to-day activities

This report advocates greater interaction between the Owner and moderators within the day-to-day discussions of the community. Seeking to address the separation of these two groups using curated weekly evergreen topic discussions would also generate an artefacts and new norms granting further meaning to the change.

2.   Increase commitment to the group

Ahrens et al (2019) describe the process of integrating people back into the organisation as "(Re-)Understanding the Dream" whereby social capital is accrued by the organisation and distributed among the community, and unequal exchanges through highly detailed over-communication results in generalised exchange through reciprocity. Distribution of social capital could be achieved in this case by creating and assigning new roles to members and would grant affiliative power to those individuals. Even unserious or humours roles based on in-jokes would serve to widen the power base within the organisation.

3.   Intentionally change culture through structure

The loss of control from radically decentralising power poses too high a risk of potential damage for a commercially-linked organisation to its brand, reputation, and premium subscriber count. This report suggests that intentionally shifting the culture of the whole organisation to a Power Culture not only addresses the cultural rift between the sub-cultures of moderators and regular members, but it also powerfully aligns the organisation's culture with its mission: a space for political discussion explicitly governed by leveraging power to build coalitions and consensus.

C.   Action Research

Lewin argued for theory and practice to be strongly linked. "There is nothing so practical as good theory" (Lewin, 1951). Action research also describes the methodological approach taken in Lewin's three step model, where the feedback loop of action, research, and evaluation cause a spiral of diagnosis leading to tailored solutions. Applied to this case, this report suggests that the whole organisation is included through the use of polling and non-private open feedback forums in order to help the group answer questions collectively. The mass size of the organisation means that a lean towards consultative and confirmatory votes would be more constructive than group discussion.

D. Three Step Model

Lewin's three step model consists of Unfreezing the field forces supporting the status quo behaviour, Moving using an Action Research methodology in a trial and error approach, and Refreezing to stabilise the group in a new equilibrium to prevent regression.
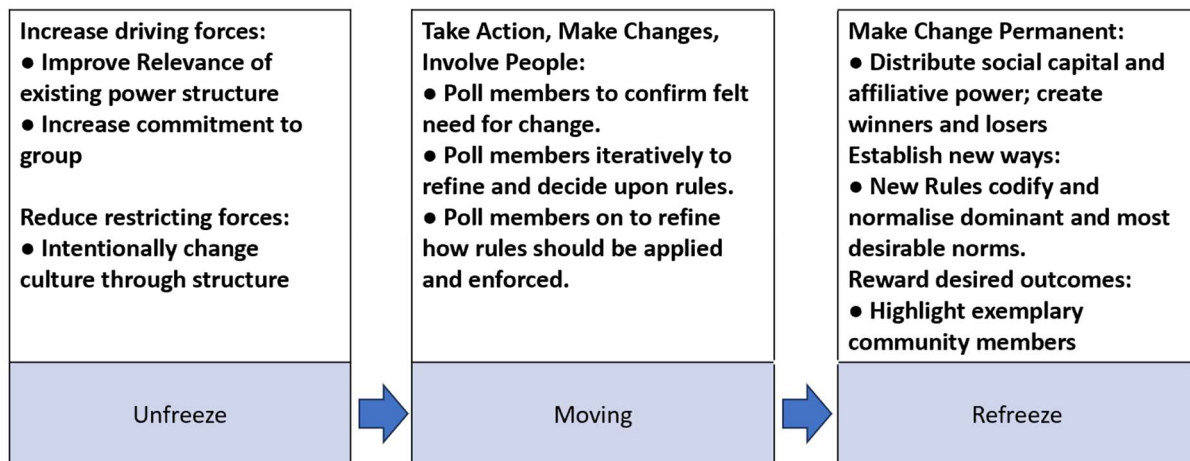
Increase driving forces: ● Improve Relevance of existing power structure ● Increase commitment to group Reduce restricting forces: ● Intentionally change culture through structure	Take Action, Make Changes, Involve People: ● Poll members to confirm felt need for change. ● Poll members iteratively to refine and decide upon rules. ● Poll members on to refine how rules should be applied and enforced.	Make Change Permanent: ● Distribute social capital and affiliative power; create winners and losers Establish new ways: ● New Rules codify and normalise dominant and most desirable norms. Reward desired outcomes: ● Highlight exemplary community members
Unfreeze	Moving	Refreeze

Figure 3: Lewin's Three-Step Model applied to the case of Arrested Politics.

1. Unfreeze

Unfreezing in achieved by strengthening the Driving forces or weakening the restricting forces. This report has used field theory in section II.A. Field Theory to examine the forces driving and forces restricting behaviour that results in the status quo. This report identified three areas by which to disrupt the status quo in section II.B. Group Dynamics.

2. Moving

The Unfreezing step "creates motivation to learn but does not necessarily control or predict the direction of learning" (Schein, 1996). This report suggests for the first action taken is to poll organisation members on their preference on how to address the deterioration in behaviour. This will confirm whether there is a felt need for the change and will guide its direction. The iterative approach of action, research, and more action allows the organisation to move from less acceptable behaviours to more acceptable behaviours (Burnes, 2017). This step is where the rules themselves should be established in association with the group by an iterative process of drafting, feedback via polling, and reworking. The same method should be applied to collectively answer the question of how the rules should be enforced with the moderation team acting as the change group making proposals and responding to poll feedback iteratively.

3. Refreeze

The purpose of the Refreeze step is to fortify the new status quo of group behaviours and prevent regression of the group to the old behaviours. Rewarding desired outcomes in this case could take the form of highlighting those individual

members who demonstrate exemplary conduct. This too could create a short-list which the Owner and moderators could draw upon with reference to future changes.

IV.   Conclusion

Lewin's framework offers an approach whose parts he saw as mutually reinforcing and synergistic whole. Engagement and communication with the whole organisation is crucial to the successful implementation of this change. The need for effective communication is especially acute using Lewin's model, as the change can take a long time to implement. Using Action research to bind the Moderator group's notions and the practical experience of regular members seeks to address this need. A main challenge for this change is the acceptance and adoption of the rules agreed upon. There are not enough moderators to rely on punitive enforcement alone and therefore this report seeks to utilise the power bases which exist, and broaden them further as a deliberate strategy. A key limitation of Lewin's approach is its ignoring of power and politics, despite the Moving step describing a process of consensus and coalition building. While this report provides justification for the selected approach for this change, the recommendation to transition to a more explicitly political organisation will make using Lewin's framework significantly more difficult for future change. Other frameworks which readily consider politicking would be appropriate.

V.   References

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