

Class Exercise – Observing and Understanding Organisations

One of my first jobs, as a freelance organisational development facilitator, began with a call from the Director of a local non-governmental organization (NGO). At our initial meeting he told me he was experiencing difficulties with his 'Admin team'. In his eyes they were underperforming and he wanted me to interview them, find out what the problems were and write a report with recommendations to help 'build their capacity'.

So I started by interviewing everyone to find the problems. After a while a pattern started to emerge. It seemed to me that the problem lay much more with the Director and his relationships with staff, and very little, as he had supposed, with the staff themselves. He was erratic and sometimes abusive. He sometimes shouted at them and one of the team even burst into tears at the memory. None knew what was really expected of them and they were too afraid to ask. I could see that they felt on edge and undermined, leading to low confidence, silly mistakes, petty resistance and high turnover. I spoke to some of the field-staff and much of what they had said was confirmed.

"Seems this guy is not only disorganised and erratic – he can also be quite abusive. One of their main complaints is that he shouts at them and puts them down in front of other staff members."

After the interviews, which included a general skills audit and a review of the admin systems, I wrote up a report. I described the admin systems as straightforward and workable, and that the skills required to operate them were well within the capabilities of the staff. Then I turned my sights on the Director and his relationships with the staff, boldly exposing what I had been told, with a clever analysis and a synopsis of the interviews (no names mentioned to respect confidentiality), ending with a set of smart recommendations. And all nicely laid out and printed from my new computer system. The report was delivered on time the next day and I felt quite proud of my first job. I expected to be called back to help them implement some of my recommendations.

A day or two later I was tersely summonsed to a meeting by the Director. I arrived, feeling quite nervous, since I had not been thanked for the report yet. I found the Director and the Admin team sitting on one side of a long table and a chair for me on the other. The Director was judge, jury and prosecutor! He was furious with the report and refused to believe the things the staff had said – which they dutifully denied saying under his glare – and then he rejected my analysis and dismissed me. I had been summoned, found guilty and banished!

Looking back I realized that I deserved this treatment – and I am surprised now that they even paid me!

QUESTIONS TO WORK WITH

- What attitudes and values guided the Organisational Development facilitator?
- What assumptions did he make about how people change?
- What would you have done differently?
- What were the Director's challenges here in contracting and working with the facilitator?