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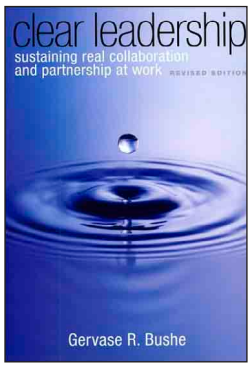

Clear Leadership

Sustaining Real Collaboration and Partnership at Work

by Gervase R. Bushe
Nicholas Brealey Publishing © 2010
296 pages

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Take-Aways

- Collaboration is replacing the old command-and-control workplace paradigm.
- Because collaboration requires robust partnerships among employees, “interpersonal mush” can make it hard to sustain.
- Interpersonal mush develops when colleagues invent stories about one another to explain puzzling attitudes, actions and behaviors.
- To eliminate interpersonal mush, engage in “learning conversations” with others.
- Examine the elements of your experience: “observing, thinking, wanting and feeling.”
- To maintain “interpersonal clarity,” avoid becoming too close to or too detached from your co-workers.
- Build personality skills such as enhanced self-awareness, curiosity and appreciation, as well as the ability to describe your experiences honestly and effectively.
- As a leader, don’t use your authority to try to stifle conflicts.
- Instead, encourage your employees to share their “sense-making stories” about others, so they can correct their misperceptions.
- Learning within organizations takes place “one conversation at a time.”

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
9	**9**	**8**	**8**

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) What "interpersonal mush" is and why it occurs, 2) How to use "learning conversations" to eliminate it and 3) What the main skills of "clear leadership" are.

Recommendation

A chapter in *Something Happened*, the 1974 novel by Joseph Heller, starts: "In the office in which I work there are five people of whom I am afraid. Each of these five people is afraid of four people (excluding overlaps) for a total of 20, and each of these 20 people is afraid of six people, making a total of 120 people who are feared by at least one person…[Everyone is] afraid of the 12 men at the top who helped found and build the company." That's a lot of fear. Does this environment sound familiar? Distrust, depression and anxiety are endemic in many organizations. According to professor and consultant Gervase R. Bushe, such negative emotions often result from the "interpersonal mush" that plagues offices. He details a program you can use to help eliminate the mush and create a workplace that fosters partnership and collaboration. Bushe also provides a set of exercises at the end of each of the leadership skill chapters with practical exercises. *getAbstract* recommends Bushe's intelligent, well-researched book to all executives, as well as to anyone who wants to learn how to relate to others honestly, openly and straightforwardly.

Abstract

Clearing a Path for Collaboration

"Under conditions of interpersonal mush, people can't learn together from their experience, because they are not describing their experience."

Companies used to revolve around executives' orders, but that is no longer the case. In the modern workplace, collaboration is the default setting. Employees are empowered to make their own decisions. However, collaboration inside an organization is difficult to maintain. Why? "Interpersonal mush," or interactions that evolve from "sense-making stories" co-workers invent about one another, gets in the way. People explain puzzling behavior by creating narratives that lend significance and consistency to what they observe. However, their stories are often negative and disconnected from reality.

"Authority creates barriers to interpersonal clarity, and there may be nothing you can do about that. But that doesn't mean you can't create a culture of clarity beneath you."

Usually, no one tries to prove or disprove sense-making stories, so they take on a life of their own. They become the faulty lenses through which everyone in the organization views one another. People often generate explanations for other people's behaviors that align with stories they've devised or previously constructed. They notice actions and attitudes that support their stories and overlook those that don't. As a result, their misperceptions – and the distrust, depression and burnout they cause – endure and strengthen.

To foster a positive, collaborative environment, organizations must eliminate interpersonal mush and make way for "interpersonal clarity." That involves understanding how hierarchy and authority contribute to interpersonal mush, which is "greatest in situations of unequal power." Managers, supervisors and other leaders greatly influence their employees' success; thus, workers tend to build numerous sense-making stories around their leaders. And employees are very unlikely to confront authority figures to verify the truth of their sense-making stories.

"Our sense making has long-term consequences, and when our stories are inaccurate, we end up living in a make-believe world."

As a manager, you can help remedy this problem by learning from the organization's "collective experience" and helping your employees learn from it, too. That isn't easy to do, because everyone views collective experience – and everything else – from an individual perspective. Try to understand others' "subjective truths" in addition to your own, and seek "intersubjective truths," or truths upon which everyone can agree. To collaborate effectively, you and your employees must address your perceptions openly. Otherwise, interpersonal mush will be the order of the day.

A Big, Bad Bowl of Interpersonal Mush

To understand how interpersonal mush develops, consider this scenario: Bill, a general manager, arrives 10 minutes late to a weekly meeting. His employees know that he took a call from headquarters just before the meeting. For weeks, staffers had been hearing rumors of upcoming budget cuts. However, Bill mentions nothing about the phone call and immediately dives into his meeting agenda. As soon as the meeting ends, he goes directly to his office.

"Our make-believe worlds are usually not rose-colored."

Afterward, his staff discussed Bill's behavior. One employee found him irritated, another thought him brusque and a third said he seemed preoccupied. They all attributed his mood to the call from headquarters, but they mistakenly concluded that he had received bad news. In reality, Bill's boss had called to assure him that his budget would likely stay intact, and possibly increase, but that he shouldn't tell anyone until plans were firm. By saying nothing about the phone call, Bill let interpersonal mush proliferate. Instead, he could have started the meeting by explaining that his boss had actually called with what might be good news and that he would fill in his staff as soon as possible. That way, he would have provided his true "in-the-moment experience," so people wouldn't have needed to invent stories about it. In a modern collaborative environment, where partnership is vital, managers must honestly and openly share their thoughts, even if no one directly asks for them. They need to become champions of clarity and scourges of mush.

"We can't really stop ourselves from [sense making]. The best thing we can do is notice when we are doing it, assume that our stories are usually wrong in some way and check them out before we act as if they are real."

"A Learning Conversation in Action"

As a leader, you can clear away the confusion and misunderstandings that fuel interpersonal mush. First, understand how failing to verify your perceptions may contribute to more mush. Regularly engage your employees in simple, honest learning conversations. Start by describing your own experiences and perceptions, then invite them to share theirs. Always "listen, ask questions and summarize back." Stay calm throughout the conversation, even when people's experiences don't align with your own. Don't interrupt them with explanations or opinions. Conflicts often disappear when people relate to one another in an open, direct way, as the following case study illustrates:

"Interpersonal clarity describes an interaction in which people know what their own experience is, what another person's experience is and the difference between the two."

A director was conducting a weeklong leadership seminar, overseeing six trainers. One night, one of the trainers, Bruce, said he'd like to spend the next day working in small groups, but his colleagues decided otherwise. After this, the director noticed that Bruce participated less. The next morning, Bruce asked about the day's activity plan. When the director again explained the group's decision, Bruce said, "I wonder where I was when that plan was decided." This irritated the director. Later that day, the two men clashed in a session and the director yelled at Bruce.

After a few hours, the two men engaged in a learning conversation. Bruce explained that he was upset that the director had yelled at him. He asked if something might have occurred before the incident to cause such a strong reaction. The director admitted that he had acted out of anger and shared the story he had created to try to understand

"Creating clarity with others relies on your ability to be a calming presence – to not get anxious when people have experiences that are different from yours."

Bruce's behavior – that Bruce was being difficult because he didn't get his way and that he was "attacking" the director's authority. Bruce asked questions to understand the director's experience, then carefully described his own. He explained that he did not fully participate in the planning meeting because he was preoccupied with some bad news he had just received: His father had stomach cancer. His comment about not knowing the day's plans was directed at himself for not paying close attention.

As a result of their conversation, the director realized that he should have verified the story he created about Bruce before tensions mounted. And Bruce realized that some of his behavior could be interpreted as a challenge to authority. Once the two colleagues understood each other's experiences, the conflict evaporated.

"Self-Differentiation"

"Clear leaders are able to be clear about performance expectations and stay true to their vision while listening to and seeking to understand the fears and objections of the people who will have to carry out that vision."

People who are too close to, or too detached from, their co-workers fail to achieve interpersonal clarity. As a leader, understand how the opposing forces of "fusion" and "disconnection" influence you and your direct reports. Always maintain clear boundaries. Don't let others' actions dictate your own thoughts and experiences, since that could cause you to become "fused" with them and to hold them responsible for your experiences. If that happens, you might start delivering explicit and implicit messages about what constitutes acceptable discourse and what is off-limits. Eventually, honest communications would become impossible. Many employees automatically fuse with their managers, which compounds this communication problem.

The opposite extreme is the tendency to detach completely from others. Disconnected people see others not as human beings, but as objects to avoid – or, conversely, to manipulate. Such people have no interest in the thoughts, feelings and experiences of their co-workers. As a result, these individuals don't think about how their actions and attitudes may affect others, either positively or negatively. Such detachment is a common problem among senior managers.

"Shame is the number one impediment to well-intentioned, normal people having learning conversations."

Self-differentiating, or striking a healthy balance between fusion and disconnection, is crucial. Self-differentiated individuals know that experiences vary from person to person – and that all experiences are equally valid. These individuals recognize that others have needs, ideas and desires and are interested in understanding those aspects. However, they don't assume responsibility for others' views or feelings or try to change them. And they don't lose their own sense of self. Self-differentiation represents a journey of personal development, not a fixed intellectual or emotional end-point. As such, achieving it requires conscious striving.

"The Experience Cube"

"Clear leadership is about creating inquiry when our performance or relationships are not what we want them to be."

Fully understanding your in-the-moment experience helps you self-differentiate and create meaningful partnerships. To learn from experience, develop the ability to tap into your "full range of experience" and to communicate it to others. That means being aware of four elements:

1. **"Observing"** – Observations are the things you hear and see and touch. For instance, an observation could be that someone is frowning. Observations are objective, whereas the other three elements of experience are subjective.
2. **"Thinking"** – "All the cognitive processes," from opinions and insights to computations and daydreams, fit this category. Know the difference between thoughts and observations; noting that someone is hungry is a thought, not an observation.

3. **"Wanting"** – This involves the wishes, needs, objectives and motivations that drive your actions. Understanding others' wants helps you maintain strong partnerships.
4. **"Feeling"** – This includes your emotions as well as your "body sensations," like "pain and pleasure, tension and release." Learn to become aware of your feelings without letting them overwhelm you or negatively affect your behavior.

"Much of what we do is the result of a series of mostly unconscious calculations in which we balance what we want, what others want and how much we and they want it."

"Clear Leadership Skills"

Four clear leadership skills will help you engage in fruitful learning conversations:

1. **"Aware Self"** – This skill requires careful self-reflection. Examine the four elements of experience: what you observe, think, want and feel. Through reflection, uncover your subjective truths, and describe those truths clearly to others. Awareness gives you more "choice" by weakening the power of your unconscious feelings and wants.
2. **"Descriptive Self"** – A fully developed Descriptive Self enables you to sense when people "might need to make up a story about you," so you can sidestep interpersonal mush by clarifying your behavior. People are not mind readers; you must help them grasp what is going on in your head. Make yourself understandable to others without offending or upsetting them. One way to help new partners understand you better is to ask them, "What do you think I just said?" Then explain yourself repeatedly until they comprehend you. In this mode, you deal only in descriptions, never in judgments.
3. **"Curious Self"** – This skill centers on understanding the experiences of others and even helping them understand themselves. By observing others, asking questions and listening, you uncover their subjective truths. Encourage your colleagues to become their Descriptive Selves. Avoid "reactivity," or "the tendency to want to respond and fix things before other people have finished telling their truth."
4. **"Appreciative Self"** – This mental mode involves creating robust partnerships by focusing on others' strengths and merits. See people as partners, not adversaries. Rather than assigning malicious motives to people's actions, see them as the "heroes of their own stories." Understand that your idealism and positivity play an active role in creating the other person who "shows up." Identify promising areas and nurture them.

"Real partnership means giving everyone an equal voice."

"Learning to Sustain Collaborative Organizations"

As the business world evolves and technology advances, collaborative partnerships will increasingly become the standard. Such partnerships are easy to initiate but difficult to sustain. However, using clear leadership, you can foster an open environment where partners are willing to deal with each other in a straightforward way. Don't use your authority to try to stifle conflicts. Rather, encourage your employees to share their sense-making stories, so they can correct their misperceptions and learn from collective experience.

"An ancient piece of wisdom says that whatever we pay attention to increases."

Learning within organizations takes place "one conversation at a time." Learning conversations will thrive only if leaders promote a "culture of clarity." That means all employees share what they are observing, thinking, wanting and feeling. Without open discussions about individual perceptions, people will invent stories and treat them as the truth. Learning conversations enable colleagues to collaborate by clearing away the mush that can block real partnerships.

About the Author

Gervase R. Bushe, Ph.D., is a leadership development consultant. He teaches leadership at the Segal Graduate School of Business at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia.

