

Organisations & People



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VOICE ARISING

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Facilitator work with 'voices' can initiate the kinds of partnerships needed to transform those public institutions which find change difficult.

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Voice Arising

TONY PAGE



*Seven years after writing *Diary of a Change Agent* (Gower, 1996), and three years after co-founding a community for change agents (called New Intermediaries www.newintermediaries.co.uk), Tony Page, revisits three real cases. Why? To uncover how 'facilitator work' with voices, can initiate the kinds of partnerships we need to transform the 'big work' of institutions such as hospitals, schools and railways, which suffer difficulty with change. Illustrations by Julian Burton.*

KEYWORDS: Communication, integrity, authenticity

From unvoiced confusion

I'm wanting to say there are inherently difficult situations where we facilitators are most needed. But in these places I can lose my way in heightened emotions. Then I fear I'm failing and flip into fight or flight.

So I'm making a map

As a facilitator I hold the space for people to speak to each other and as a person-who-speaks-and-listens I have direct experience of what blocks....blocks what? At first this question stumps me, then I realise it is LIFE: my speaking sends signals that enliven or suppress you. When my voice enlivens, it contains a vital juice

that joins me with you and transforms our experience in the moment. This juice "changes" the world as we both experience it and simultaneously eases our acceptance of what the world brings.

To understand this juicy "change" potential in our conversations, I'm reflecting on how my voice arises, reaches others and a reaction returns. I'm slowing events down dramatically, following an impulse to defy our familiar "time set" and expose a lifetime in each moment.

Life starting with an itch...

If I pay attention there is mostly an itch. I resist the urge to scratch in case it expands and overwhelms me. Instead I distract myself with work,

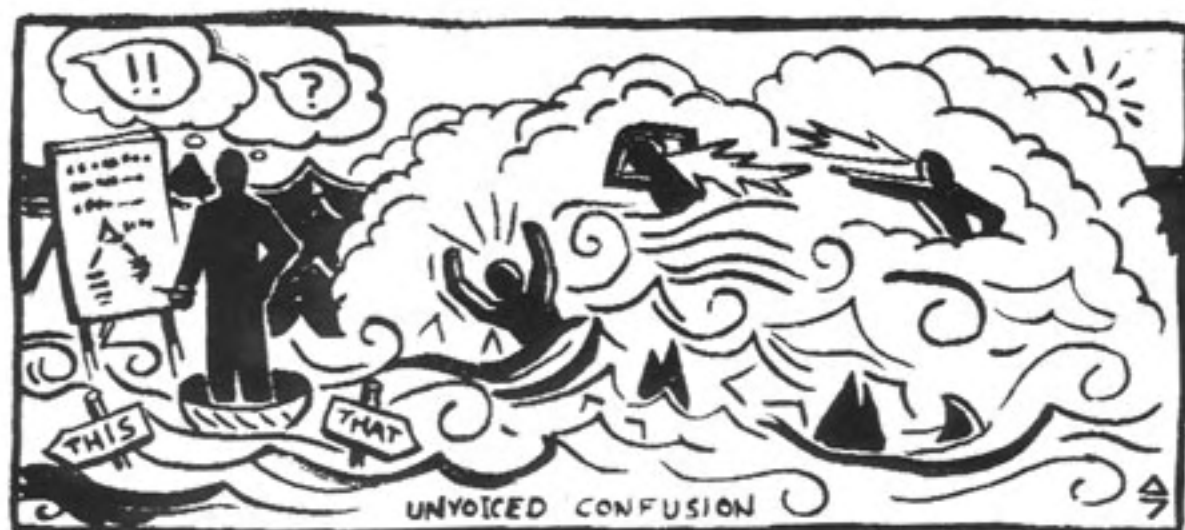


Figure 1: Unvoiced Confusion

chat, jobs at home, a bike ride or something.... But I know after minutes (or years) the itch will return, like a fly buzzing a familiar loop round a light bulb.

It's that time again. I can't settle. My mind races here and there, but when I try to voice what's there I miss its essence. Eyes glaze over, instead of telling me I'm understood. I get no reaction, or no understanding, thus no satisfaction. Life is a series of conversations made up of such moments that colour my emotions: happy or frustrated, included or rejected, contributing or taking up space.

Even patient questions fail. I rant while feeling a bit mad: half here and half gone. But I do know my energy is rising, humming now... and I yearn to be in the loop, my energy flowing into the world and back again, confirming my place in the universe.

Then it's time...

Minutes (or years) pass while I avoid the itch. I sleep, eat, earn, learn: do what's normal until finally a moment comes when I awake brilliantly clear. It's time at last! This is happening right now, inspiring me to write this piece. After a lifetime of playing it safe, I have awoken in mid-life

feeling I must use my voice imperfect as it is, to make my difference. Like a life or death choice: to move beyond fear bringing myself fully into the world, or to grow old, dying unfulfilled in my comfortable nest; and I choose life!

I embrace danger and trust to my values: I will follow my interest, offering my voice where I notice I'm needed.

Following my interest "out there"...

Gripped by the question "where am I needed?", my routine activities fall away showing me freshly what's there. New questions and answers arise:

Q. What's my special expertise? A. *I am an organisational consultant*

Q. Which organisations attract me? A. *Those with problems...*

Q. Which problems do I notice today? A. *I see doctors, nurses, teachers, policemen, public servants leaving failing institutions... a rift between change people like me and fatigued pessimists... not coming through transitions (from denial to sense-making)... new partnerships, between public, private and third sectors*

(with apparently opposing values) that could transform schools, hospitals and railways... but beyond reach... "change" is putting up barriers, creating fear, blocking conversation, breaking relationships... like an old house it needs re-wiring.

Blimey! I didn't know all that was there!

Moving "in here"...

Curiosity rising my attention moves inside. I am bored by my old work, not chasing it although I still need the money. What's stopping me? I want to do work that makes my heart sing! My growing children need me less, and I'm seeking a new cause, while still holding my family close. I face basic questions: did I do good work today? Did I make a difference? Do I leave the world better or worse?

And how would I know... in a world that seems to be falling apart? Expressing my stuck feeling a friend suggests "other hand writing" and this stream jerks onto my page in hard-to-decipher squiggles:

"struggling to reveal itself, no 'myself'... Why?... Forgotten... Unnoticed... Disapproved of... The quality missing from my voice... The potential not yet unleashed... Maybe not so kind... More insistent, passionate. GRRR! ... Expressive... Playful... Funny... Irresponsible... Fun... Less predictable... Joyful... Child... Yippee! Pure energy... Scary... Angry... Zest... Life force... Compassionate... Caring... Vulnerable... Perceptive... Insightful... Heart... Infinitely creative, capable."

Seeing treasures lurking, an idea crystallises: to bring my inner voice "out to play" ... and what about others' held-in voices? How much might we be missing in each other? (*1 See Finding Your Inner and Outer Voice) This VOICE issue is in every person, conversation, relationship, team and organisation world-wide!

1 FINDING YOUR INNER AND OUTER VOICE

1. Inner: take 40 seconds reflecting in silence on "good and bad conversations"
 2. Outer: take 40 seconds speaking aloud on the same topic
 3. Take 40 seconds noticing the difference. Which was most/least comfortable?
- We each have a preference but meet people of both types. Balancing inner and outer voice, in ourselves and with others, enhances communication.

Testing it out quietly...

Grandiose maybe.... but what if my work is to bring held-in voices out? Now this feels half baked, but worth cooking more. Is the mark of a good facilitator to bring people more fully to each other? Could I check by revisiting recent facilitation challenges? Three situations spring to mind.

Difficult experience 1

A government agency providing IT systems was struggling with on-time delivery, political infighting and lack of support. Three stakeholders (all on the agency's Board) agreed to work through their differences with the senior management team. In the morning senior managers complained of hostility from stakeholders who in turn felt they were scratching around, trying not to criticise. Stakeholders said the agency was failing by missing opportunities. They wanted recognition things were not working and a signal of willingness to change.

After lunch the senior managers felt unsupported. They talked of being "piggy in the middle", and "walking uphill with concrete boots on". They wanted to work in partnership, but stakeholders did not sense real commit-



Figure 2: Noticing the Voices

ment to change. This left senior managers deflated, coming across to stakeholders as lacking zest. Stakeholders started to talk about disbanding the agency. At the close they refused to say whether the agency was OK, on probation or irreparably bust.

Notice the voices...

The situation is full of held-in or blurted-out voices (*2 see Voicing Undiscussables—Left Hand Column). Born of frustration from years of familiar workshop rituals (leaders too busy to be there, discussions bogged down, decisions overturned later, flipcharts unread) this hard-won meeting was different. The right people were

there, well briefed and had a real conversation. Voices were moving, truths being spoken, but I felt concerned about the harshness: frustrated stakeholders lashing out at hapless senior managers, like bullies not partners.

I daydream. A puppy spooks a cat that hisses aggressively causing the puppy to draw back. Instead of punishing the cat the owner says "they've got to sort this out between them; then they'll be friends still when the puppy is grown up". Partnership-building isn't cosy; it's scary!

So how could facilitators "control" this meeting to produce a "good" outcome? Like the puppy and the cat, the right people must experience each other "directly", preferably without being abusive (*3 see Non-Violent

2 VOICING UNDISCUSSABLES—LEFT HAND COLUMN (Chris Argyris)

When a conversation is not going well, choose a small part and write it as a script in the right hand column of a blank page. In the left hand column write what you were thinking and feeling but not saying. What held you back? How could you know the other person's left hand column? This requires both voicing and finding out.

3 NON-VIOLENT COMMUNICATION (Marshall Rosenberg)

Used in conflict settings worldwide: Israel, Ireland, Yugoslavia, USA. You voice what is going on within yourself, finding your power without criticising, forcing or attacking others. You learn to inquire and receive using four elements: What do you Observe? What do you Feel (...without judging)? What do you Need (...without blaming)? What do you Request (...which benefits the other person too)?

Communication). Anger surfacing feels bad but in the larger scheme can be good. The harshness indicated a pre-existing leadership vacuum, not a facilitator "mistake". This meeting proved a turning point and two months later we helped the agency's Board recover its focus and leadership.

Difficult Experience 2

Two members of a leadership team have an argument during a strategy workshop.

A Of 9 of us here, only 5 live with what we decide. We should face up to this

B (...angry) I object. I have to carry this into the wider company

A That's not what I'm saying. C is leaving in November, D is going overseas...

B (...cutting in) You're not listening. I'm saying...

A (...talking over): What I'm saying is...

A B is saying he does have to carry this forward.

By stopping the meeting, then slowing everything down, I made sure each message was received before carrying a reaction back. The conversation turned satisfyingly as each person heard the other for the first time.

Fac. What's your reaction to this A?

A Well I accept that but what I'm saying is B has only been to 3 meetings in the last 2 years, so does our code of conduct concern him?

B. I thought we decided I would only turn up when needed for a specific reason

A Did we? I don't remember that. And what I'm saying is I want your input at all our meetings

B. Ahh, (...sighing). I thought you didn't want me here, and were trying to keep me out.

A No

Fac. So B, far from being pushed aside, A is drawing you in

B. OK. I feel much better now.

The issue of "directness" or "politeness" evaporated as the group found new energy from

Notice the voices...

The heat was rising. The "warriors" were confident and valued "directness" but four newer members pre-warning me of fights dominating each meeting, were afraid of being attacked for speaking out, and wanted a code of (polite) conduct. I did not know what to do about this fundamental difference but started where my attention was drawn: making sure the two combatants communicated with each other:

Fac. Hold it! Slow down! You've missed each other twice. B tell me, what's your message to A. I'm going to ask A to play back what you're saying before responding. B.

B. I'm saying that I DO have to carry forward what we decide

4 UNBLOCKING CONTACT—GESTALT MODEL (Tony Fraser/Ed Nevis)

Through Voice we make contact, assert our needs and respond to others' needs. Old habits sabotage attempts to make contact. There are five main ways we fail:

Confluence—blending in too well, not voicing your needs clearly.

Introjection—accepting unquestioningly others' needs before your own.

Projection—denying your feelings and responsibilities, being victim to others.

Retroflection—turning on yourself, feeling guilty, criticising yourself harshly.

Deflection—avoiding, not responding to needs of others.

The facilitator notices these blocking patterns and encourages each person to take responsibility for voicing their needs clearly.

5 GROUP CONFLICT AND VOICE (Roger Pearman/Myers Briggs)

To be alive, like breathing, requires both "taking-in" what is happening in the world and "giving-out". Introverts are comfortable taking in and Extraverts giving out.

During conflict we get locked into favourite mode: loud people get louder and quiet quieter. The Introvert is lively inside but puts little out, while the Extravert pouring out their voice stops hearing themselves. A group thus polarises into talkers and reflectors. If you try to force closure now, you get a blockage: low energy, cold conflict paralysing the group.

The unheard inner voice is key to moving on. Call time-out, ask talkers to listen, draw reflectors out. By supporting everyone in their least preferred process, you re-balance the group.

6 FREEING A HELD-IN VOICE (Esther Zalniser)

A held-in voice comes up reluctantly, with embarrassment and its impact can be shocking, provoking rejection or hostility. The facilitator lends support to the voice and explores what's there, acknowledging this is where the energy is right now. Appropriate responses include: "...Thank you. I appreciate what you said...Yes I get it, the (anger, sadness or whatever)...Is there anything else?...I appreciate how somehow the (anger/sadness...etc) serves and protects you...Is that true?...How does this happen?...OK. What's next?

Having brought out a blocked inner voice, a person tends to feel heard, easier, part of things again and typically a group recovers its momentum.

communicating well. The meeting picked up speed. The newer participants gained in confidence, contributed more and earned the respect of the warriors (*4 see Unblocking Contact—Gestalt Model).

In this exchange I realise the facilitator's work is to "work the voices" (*5 see Group Conflict and Voice). If the meeting becomes a fight (hot conflict) or stuck (cold conflict), then a voice held-in once released produces movement. Except when fights happen, I prefer to facilitate with a light touch, first finding a relevant question then providing minimum structure to propel discussion, placing emphasis on including people, sharing responsibility for receiving voices and letting life emerge (*6 see Freeing a Held-in Voice).

This can be messy: some yearn for clearer direction which I cannot provide without suppressing life. The group lives on the edge of chaos, makes "mistakes" and learns to recover. We all play midwife bringing new

decisions to life (*7 see Voice Patterns in a Conversation).

Difficult experience 3

We arrive, 20 area directors, for a "stocktaking", six weeks after our two companies have merged. In spite of a good atmosphere at

7 VOICE PATTERNS IN A CONVERSATION
(David Kantor/William Isaacs)

A healthy dialogue includes four moves:

INITIATE = making a proposal for conversation

FOLLOW = supporting a proposal

OPPOSE = challenging what is being said

BYSTAND = with one foot in and one foot out, describing what you are seeing and hearing

With these four moves in mind, you notice the voice patterns and what's missing in a conversation.

previous workshops, this time it's strained. Reality has dawned. Some feel frustration, others excitement and we're confused at not feeling the same. Soon we find common themes: swamped with paper, lacking information, feeling stressed, out of control.

Deep seated doubts surface about being one company. We suffer cost-cutting pressure and feel little real influence. Our first monthly meeting made us feel small with decisions banded down not debated. Our two bosses (Network Directors) are absent—in a "more important" meeting.

The facilitators turn us round, finding something we can influence: we want a style change to our monthly meeting (due to happen tomorrow)!

When "they" (the Network Directors) arrive after lunch "we" have prepared what to say and are eager for a result, but disarmingly "they" begin voicing their frustrations of the last six weeks, which largely echo ours. The ensuing discussion reassures us we are implementers-who-influence, not passive-order-takers. We reaffirm our responsibility for reducing costs while improving customer service.

They address our frustrations head on: identifying actions to stem the information flow and improve our meetings. They even phone their boss to change tomorrow's agenda! Yes! A result! We depart happy, reassured of our significance, re-united in a sense of partnership.

Notice the voices...

Boiling over frustration broke up the group of 20 and destroyed trust in the bosses. I was worried about the group spiralling down into depression but could only think to draw out and acknowledge the voices of frustration. Then re-united the group got rebellious, swinging wildly between dangerous ideas. I helped the group

8 RECLAIMING PROJECTIONS (Ken Wilber)

We all have blind spots and traits we deny in ourselves but project onto others. During conflict our disowned material affects us painfully, making us feel like victims. Reclaiming our power happens in two steps: taking responsibility and reversing the projection. If I am feeling anxiety, then I fully voice it and feel it, recognise that I am tensing and blocking my excitement about something out there, then falling victim to it. To reverse a projection I voice its opposite and feel the effect: "My partner needs me" becomes "I need my partner", "I'm afraid of being alone" becomes "I'm damned if I'll give anyone my time". Reclaiming projections is central to transforming adversaries into partners.

find its voice restoring its optimism. I then felt anxious the bosses would dismiss the group's voice undoing our good work. After voicing my concern the bosses opened up, received the group's voice and the "partnership" was reborn (*8 see Reclaiming Projections).

In each hot situation I bring out the voices (= stories, passion, emotion...). Initially people adopt positions (I'm "right"/you're "wrong") which when explored are subtly surrendered, revealing vulnerabilities. They take off masks, take on learning, making reparations (admissions, sorries, verbal hugs). Then realising they depend on each other, a group tackles something together (face an obstacle, make a decision, begin a project) and a partnership begins.

A map arises:

1. Gather the Right People - in the right frame of mind (from ex 1)
2. Work All the Voices - don't forget the inner voice (from ex 2)

3. Re-discover Interdependency - start working in partnership (from ex 3).

Could this be how to re-wire those old houses?

The map prepares me for difficult conflict situations:

- When participants challenge what is happening.
- When something is avoided and no one wants to talk about it.
- When hot (gender, ethnic, religious, power, harassment) issues surface.
- When a new partnership needs to be forged under difficult circumstances.
- When trust is breaking down and a key relationship needs to be renewed.
- Phew! This doesn't seem so half baked after all!

The moment of utterance...

Now I'm compelled to share the VOICE idea, so I draft this piece but my writing get complicated: "...Instead of getting caught in the paralytic of programmes, isn't our best role as leaders and facilitators to" I struggle to edit, then my heart pounds as I ask three colleagues for an opinion. I feel so vulnerable. They might not be interested, then I might feel crushed. Or they might be "kind", or worse: silent.

The struggle to connect...

Well I get honesty: *"I find it hard to read, overwhelmed by so many words, my energy sinks... you seem deflected from your core. Who is this for? How is it useful? What is your intent?"*

9 FOUR VOICE ENERGIES (Julia Williams)

Call to mind a logical, flat and lifeless voice, or a cynical, or jokey one. Words are spoken but you get a weak or "mixed" message. Knowing that FEAR drives us into our HEADs (thinking, logic, analysis), the facilitator calls forth three body energies that give voices the power to move:

HEART: What joins you to others. Source of love, opening to others, getting the juices flowing

SOLAR PLEXUS: What distinguishes you. Source of ego, personal power, uniqueness, feelings.

GUT: What grounds you. Source of wisdom, intuition, experience, knowing.

I feel alone and defeated, and I start to realise a hard lesson: how ego distorts my voice. Between source and destination my words are scrambled. I try to be entertaining, objective, to box things clearly, to be above criticism. My subtle disrespect triggers their caution. My fear inflates me, draws me back and up, presses my colleagues down and away. My words assault them and deny us both our human-ness. And as I realise this...

... exasperated, I step off my platform, put down my sword and try again, voicing my intent to be authentic, conveying my deeper truth... and reacting honestly to their honest objections, my voice arises... *"I'm wanting to say there are difficult situations where I lose my way"*... effortlessly from my core we connect and achieve understanding. In this moment fear is gone, we are joined, at one with the universe (*9 see Four Voice Energies).

Getting the change juice flowing...

No facilitator denies the importance of "listening" but, in exploring its companion "voicing",



Figure 3: The Change Juice Flows

we hark back to an ancient process honoured in healthy communities worldwide, and re-connecting with the roots of democracy, drama and creativity and also with the seeds of injustice, terrorism and war. From the first itch it is a familiar story:

- *Arising in you is a special message but ... your fear (or brashness or something) triggers others' rejection.*
- *Turning this into a gift that enlivens rather than squashes ... earns you the priceless gift of feeling valued and joined.*

Life's karma mirror reflects back oppression when we oppress others. In difficult work situations when burdened or anxious we become blind and experience others as dangerous things, then get angry or shy away. Contact becomes minimal or abusive, and a system gets stuck.

Leaders are hitting barriers as they try to enact even simple plans in today's workplace. As facilitators we invoke a healing pattern, enabling voice to meet voice respectfully, then people feel valued for their special difference and they find the heart to value others for theirs. Each person experiences being valued, being both different and joined, "individual" and "partner". Respect and trust grows.

When we are not heard we do not belong or feel respected: so we yearn and fight for life. When heard our fear and anger diffuses, and our hearts are stimulated. This is inherently rewarding, and importantly it is how "change juice" flows.

So now, please use what you find here to enliven, or be inspired to make your own map, and join me to develop this further.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

Julia Williams and Tony Page are running a series of workshops entitled "Facilitating The Inner Voice" in association with University of Surrey, Human Potential Research Group. For details contact julia@personalimpact.com or tony@pageconsulting.co.uk.