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A QUESTION OF OD CAPABILITY

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CAPABILITY.

THE POWER OR ABILITY TO DO SOMETHING

The Oxford Living Dictionary

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Capability. Defined by the Oxford Living Dictionary as “the power or ability to do something”.

There is an assumption that we can build capability in an organisation. The word is often used in the context of the organisation.

Is it possible to grow capability in an organisation?

I was asked by a client to explore a question surrounding the issue of capability. The client organisation had invested a significant amount of time, money and effort seeking to build OD capability. For some reason, there was a perception that the expected results had not materialised. I was asked to explore the possible reasons and come up with some suggestions.

When I use the term “OD” I am including both Organisation Development and Organisation Design.

The inquiry question was:

How can we grow and sustain OD capability in the HRBP community?

I used the concept of first, second and third person research, which not only served as a framework for my question, but also shaped my findings.

FIRST, SECOND AND THIRD PERSON RESEARCH

Reason and Torbett (2001) describe first person research as encompassing those skills and methods (that) address the ability of the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her life, to act awaredly and choicefully, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting. As such, first person research is research that we do by ourselves on ourselves. By becoming “action researchers” of our own experience, we can go beyond our deeply ingrained defence mechanisms to create new possibillites for action.

Second person research involves creating communities of inquiry with others in which we are willing to explore the possible incogruities between what we say and what we do. It occurs when we inquire with others in face to face groups about our shared mission, our norms, and the quality of our individual performances on behalf of the team’s mandate.

It is about having conversations in which participants share an intention to learn about themselves, the others present and the team culture, as well as to delve into how to generate mutual transformation, if it is warranted. This process takes place in a supportive, self disclosing and open way.

During third person research, people come together to create an organisation that provides the necessary conditions for people to engage in first and second person research.

During my inquiry, the word practice arose in several conversations. Again, I find the Oxford Living Dictionary helpful. It defines practice as, “the actual application or use of an idea, belief or method, as opposed to theories relating to it”.

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The Oxford Living Dictionary ”

THE INQUIRY PHASE

Over a period of six months, I met with groups and individuals and asked the question:

How can we grow and sustain OD capability in the HRBP community?

During my inquiry, several subjects emerged that helped me make sense of what was going on, the two highlights being error and how I practise my practice.

Error

Although the question did not include the word “error”, I discovered it was in fact at the heart of the question.

In his book, ‘Black Box Thinking’ Matthew Syed provides a useful insight into how organisations use data and what constitutes error. He helpfully describes error as the gap between what we hoped would happen and what actually did happen. This helped me understand the client’s question and my response to it (Syed, 2016).

Syed tells a story about a doctor named Henry Otero. He was an oncologist who made a report after being told that he had failed to post the low magnesium level of a patient. “I missed it”, he told a newspaper, “I don’t know how I missed it. But I realise it’s not about me, it’s about the patient. The process needs to stop me making a mistake. I need to be able to say, I might be the reason, fix me” (Syed, 2016, p.54).

As my inquiry progressed, this was a quote that challenged my personal vulnerability and influenced my view of self and learning. Error is not something to be covered up, but to be explored and used for good.

Error:
...the gap between
what we hoped would
happen and what
actually did happen

How I practise my practice...

How do I actually do OD?

How I practise my practice

How do I actually do OD?

Syed picks up this point in his book, asking the question why experience in some areas of expertise can be valuable, whilst in others worthless. He gives the illustration of golf. Through a process of trial and error the golfer improves. They can see where the ball lands in relationship to the hole. They become an expert golfer through real time feedback, experienced on the course and captured on the scorecard.

**... suppose you practise
in the dark? You have
no idea... you may think
you are becoming an
expert, but who knows?**

Now suppose you practise in the dark? You have no idea where your ball lands and you cannot keep score. You may think you are becoming more expert, but who knows?

I began to apply this concept to how I practise my own OD practice. Yes, I know some OD theory and methods, but am I becoming more expert through real time feedback?

**Am I learning by doing or am I
practising in the dark?**

This was a question that shaped my inquiry.

... am I becoming more expert through real time feedback?

Am I learning by doing or am I practising in the dark?

EMERGING KEY THEMES

From my conversations within my client organisation, I identified the following key themes in response to my inquiry question.

LEARNING	If the learning could not be used in the here and now it would be quickly lost. It is a case of use it or lose it.	ROLE OF HRBP	What is my role? Am I a consultant or a partner? Consultants disengage once the work is done.
CUSTOMER	Are we clear on who our customer is and do we have a clear OD offer?	CONFIDENCE	Am I confident to be able to deliver impactful OD interventions?
INVESTMENT	Are we able to quantify our OD investment?	SUPPORT	What support do I have to plan, deliver and evaluate OD interventions?
OD PRACTICE	Are we clear on what we mean when we use the term OD? Do we have a shared understanding?	CAPACITY	Do I have capacity to get involved in OD work? Are OD projects perceived to be an add on to my day job?
NEED	There is a clear and growing need for effective, impactful OD interventions.	ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT & ORGANISATION DESIGN	Are we clear about the differences and similarities within our Business Partner community?

FIRST PERSON RESEARCH

As I reflected on the client experiences shared with me, distilled into the above themes, I began to reflect on my own practice.

A question emerged for me, mirroring the question raised by my client:

How can I grow and maintain my OD capability?

I began to explore each of the themes using a first person research lens.

This led me to ask another question:

Is it possible to grow and sustain OD capability in a community without first addressing the capability challenges and needs of those in the community?

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First Person Research:

Research that we do by ourselves on ourselves. By becoming action researchers of our own experience, we can go beyond our deeply ingrained defence mechanisms to create new possibilities for action.
(Trullen Jordi, Torbert Bill)

I conclude that whilst we can create or organise an environment conducive to building capability, that is not enough.

Often, the capability challenge is framed in such a way that makes it impersonal. It is about someone else or another group. Indeed, my client's question frames it as the HRBP community. It implies the issue resides in someone other than me.

The story told by Henry Otero highlights where the heart of capability lies. "I need to be able to say, I might be the reason, fix me." (Syed, 2016, p.54)

Throughout my inquiry, for both myself and my client, responses were often based on the presumption that OD is a task to perform, rather than a mindset to be held.

In the book, 'A Field Guide for Organisation Development, Martin Saville opens up this subject, 'The Practitioner at the Heart of OD: The Role of the Individual'. He argues that, "...the field of OD is inseparable from the mindset of the OD practitioner... powerful OD practitioners work intensely with their own mindset and those of their clients, as well as with their own experiences as they unfolded."

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... the field of OD is inseparable from the mindset of the OD practitioner. ... powerful OD practitioners work intensely with their own mindset and those of their clients, as well as with their own experiences as they unfolded.

Whatever choices we make about how we arrange our activities to shape OD capability, I am of the view that all those who wish to grow and maintain their OD capability take time to explore and grow their own practice.

The key themes from my inquiry provide a framework from which one can build a series of self focused questions. I have provided examples of the type of questions I will use for myself. You may well frame your questions differently. However, I am confident that the identified themes highlight the core capability areas to consider.

SELF FOCUSED QUESTIONS

LEARNING

What OD learning am I currently engaged in? How can I use it in the here and now?

ROLE

Who am I in this? What is my role? Is that one given to me by others or one I develop as I grow my practice?

CUSTOMER

Who is my customer? Do I have a clear OD offer? Am I developing relationships?

CONFIDENCE

How confident am I to offer help to others? What shadowing opportunities could I explore? Could I grow my confidence through a mentoring relationship?

INVESTMENT

How much have I invested in my own OD practice? Am I aware of my development or am I practising in the dark?

SUPPORT

What support do I have to grow and maintain my OD capability? Where do I go for personal nourishment? What do I do to relax and refresh my practice?

OD PRACTICE

What opportunities exist in my world to get involved in the “hard and soft OD issues”, where I can practise my practice? Am I clear on what OD looks like? Could I articulate that to others?

CAPACITY

How much personal capacity do I have to grow and maintain my practice?

NEED

What OD needs am I aware of? Am I able to ask the curious questions to surface the real needs and offer myself as an instrument of change?

ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT & ORGANISATION DESIGN

Am I clear on the differences and similarities? Where do I go for support to find out more?

Martin Saville helpfully concludes his thoughts with the following guidance.

“So, to get good at OD, make a start and then practise with the support of colleagues you respect, learning from your successes and mistakes.”

SUMMARY

Is it possible to build OD capability in an organisation?

Often the capability challenge is framed in such a way that makes it impersonal. It's about someone else or another group. Indeed my client's question frames it as the HRBP community. It implies the issue resides in someone other than me.

I conclude that whilst we can create or organise an environment conducive to building capability, that is not enough.

I do not think we can build capability without first addressing the capability and needs of those in the community.

Whatever choices we make about how we arrange our activities to shape OD capability, I suggest that capability is primarily personal. It resides in me. If we wish to grow and maintain OD Capability in our organisation, I must first take time to explore and develop my own practice.

Peter Lawrence

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