

A stylized, high-contrast portrait of a woman's face. The image uses a posterized or low-poly aesthetic with vibrant colors like orange, yellow, green, and blue. The woman has light-colored eyes and a slight smile. The text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

WHAT IS REALLY GOING ON HERE

A MINI CASE STUDY IN OD

DANIELLE

Danielle definitely looked stressed. She was leading a new project and finding the team dynamics confusing and difficult to handle. 'This team is such a nightmare...I don't know if I can carry on with this.'

But what was really going on here? As leader, coach or organisation development (OD) practitioner, how do you help Danielle make sense of her experience in order to work out how to improve things? Is the cause of the stress something located in Danielle, in the team, in the wider organisation or in some combination of these?

I have found some insights from art criticism helpful in, for instance, conversations about aesthetics. If we consider an object as beautiful, is beauty an intrinsic quality of the object itself or something we attribute to it?

The former defines beauty as an objective quality, the latter as a matter of personal preference or experience, hence the phrase, 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.' If a preference is shared by a particular group of people, we could describe beauty as a cultural phenomenon.

By analogy, is Danielle's team situation intrinsically or objectively stressful, or is the stressful-ness something to do with Danielle and how she is perceiving and experiencing it?

Some art critics would say that an object can be considered beautiful if it is widely regarded as such. By analogy, we could wonder if most other people leading Danielle's team would find it similarly stressful. If so, we may conclude that, 'This is a stressful team to lead' and thereby consider with her how to change the team.

Yet what if other leaders working with similar teams don't find it so stressful? What if other people find ways to handle similar team dynamics differently?

WHAT IS REALLY GOING ON HERE?

In this case we may want to explore with Danielle, e.g. how she is feeling; what anxieties this experience may be tapping into for her; what beliefs or constructs she holds about herself and the team that are affecting her feelings and behaviour; what she may be inadvertently evoking in the team; what strategies she could deploy to feel less stressed and achieve a better team result.




Imagine, however, that other project leaders are experiencing similar stresses and difficulties in the same organisation. What if it isn't only Danielle? In other words, what if Danielle's stress experience is symptomatic of a wider systemic-cultural phenomenon?

In this case, we may work with Danielle and others to identify factors creating the stress, e.g. lack of clarity; conflicting goals; unrealistic time pressures; inadequate resources, then enable them to find ways to raise and address them organisationally.

To help myself bear these different frames of reference in mind, I once wrote, 'Diagnosis determines intervention' on a large white board behind my desk. It reminded me when working with people to pause and consider intrapersonal, interpersonal and systemic-cultural dimensions.

I also wrote, 'What passes for rationality is often irrationality in disguise' to remind myself that things are not always as they at first appear. The question now writ large on the board in my mind is, 'What is really going on here?' Curiosity and sense-making are keys to success.

REFLECTIONS

-  How would you work with Danielle to address the issue she had raised?
-  Which tools, models or approaches guide your own outlook and practice?
-  What could you do if the issues are too fluid or complex to understand?

NICK WRIGHT

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