

The art of not knowing

Tavistock Institute Food For Thought Lunchtime Talk
April 14, 2021

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Lunchtime talk: 'the art of not knowing'

- Some cultural beliefs about knowing how to lead (a group)
- Personal beliefs: (when) did you learn not knowing might be dangerous?
- 'Natural reactions' when in a not knowing place
- Experiential breakout room
- *Cheerful apprehensiveness*: a model to practice 'the art of not knowing' when in a liminal space as a leader, teacher, consultant, team-coach...



A *real* leader in western culture: some examples

Living statues at a conference: a real leader is...., can....

- John Kotter and Dan Cohen -> planned change; underlying assumption: a leader knows where to go & manages people through (8 stages)
- Giles Barrow -> we have all been 'schooled' (and learned that the teacher is active and the student is passive)
- Anthonie van Nistelrooij and Thijs Homan -> 'taboo' (when the consultant has no idea how to proceed in an unexpected event)



But then there is that moment...

- Tension rises
- You notice non-verbal behaviour between participants
- Questions come up that you cannot answer or don't even understand
- Atmosphere becomes agitated, even hostile
- All eyes are on you
- 'This is slipping of my hands'



Not knowing: cultural and personal perspective

- 'Cultural Parent' tells us not knowing is not appreciated in certain roles
- Personal experiences: e.g. children laughed about you during first presentation at primary school? punished when 'playing school'? sighs and frowning eyebrows when asking too many questions?
- Breakout room in pairs (few minutes): *when and how did you learn that not knowing may be dangerous?*



Numb the discomfort: possible reactions

- > explain again and a bit louder
- > say it is a stupid question
- > tell them you will come back to it
- > make a joke at the expense of the group/individual
- > create a bond with the most powerful participant(s)
- > jump into conclusions
- > have a break
- > ...



Consequence of your personal typical 'natural'
reaction to numb discomfort of not knowing

The same story, again...
= script of person & group

Tension and anxiety rise



Driverbehavior = more of the same

- Transactional Analysis calls this driverbehavior and recognizes 5 patterns: Be Perfect, Be Strong, Please Others, Try Hard, Hurry Up -> you do more of the same, but expect another outcome
- Arend Ardon -> managers by their 'automatic pilot behaviour' hinder the change they say they want
- Naomi Raab -> there is a bond between teacher and student to restrain not knowing; 'knowing is a defence against learning'



This moment of not knowing can become a 'liminal space'

- Emily Perlow -> in the liminal space the old is not sufficient anymore and the new does not exist yet
- Brene Brown -> vulnerability is the birth place of creativity and innovation



More of the same? Or new learning?

Liminal space



Learning,
innovation,
development

The same story, again...
= script of person & group

Tension and anxiety rise



Experiential breakout room

**‘Create
a learning experience
for the group’**



Reflection for self

- *How do you see yourself behave?*
- *What thoughts do you have about yourself, the group you were in, (the presenter of) this Tavistock Lunchtime Talk?*
- *What feelings (including body feelings) do you notice?*
- *What else did you observe?*



Containing anxiety in the not-knowing space

- Become a *transitional object* by giving an example of what authentic 'being in and with the unknown' can look and feel and be like
- Anxiety is an inevitable feature of mental life at the edge of chaos (Stacey)
- The facilitator too faces the uncertainty of discovery. 'Overcome my miserable gut-alarm' (Landaiche)
- From my notes of Tavistock training: 'develop the capacity to hold the anxiety and keep on thinking'

Something to hold on to is welcome!



Cheerful apprehensiveness



Cheerful apprehensiveness

(Dutch: *Opgewekt Ongemakkelijk zijn*)

- Create an awareness for the experience of anxiety related to 'I really have no idea what to do'. Give yourself permission to experience this;
- Be aware of the feelings and thoughts that come with the experience;
- Take 3 deep breaths before saying or doing anything (= give attention to your inner Child). Do *not* react automatically;
- *During these moments of breathing*: notice the story you tell yourself about yourself, the participants / students / employees and about not knowing. Is the Cultural Parent whispering in your ear? Is this your old (script) story?



Cheerful apprehensiveness - *continued* -

When you engage with your script story, notice your desire to flee to the safety of the 'known'. This behaviour of a leader, consultant, team-coach, teacher, trainer sabotages inquiry and growth. You create (temporary) comfort for yourself at the expense of your autonomy and at the expense of your own and students' / participants' / employees' learning.

- *Instead of satisfying the desire to flee into the known:*
go to the discomfort and explore with your participants how the theory you're working with or the project on the agenda.....
comes to life in the here and now.
Pose an open question....



Concluding remarks

Honour the space between no longer and not yet
(Nancy Levin)

Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known
(Blaise Pascal)



Short bio

I studied medieval history and had a career in education and local government. After that I was a management consultant for 12 years (mainly working for not-for-profit organisations) and co-owner of the Dutch TA-academie for 5 years. Now I am a self-employed (executive) coach and process facilitator.

And I teach Organisational Transactional Analysis (leading to an MSc certification, TA-academie/The Berne Institute/Middlesex University) and supervise TA students from various countries. In my work I combine the depth of 'connecting with the undertow' with the easy language of TA to enhance clients' understanding and options for change.

In Dutch I published on 'leadership with depth' and 'the art of not knowing' and recently wrote an article in the Transactional Analysis Journal on 'The importance of an organizational perspective in dealing with workplace bullying' (TAJ 2020, vol 50, no 4)
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03621537.2020.1809147>

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