

Chapter 49

An Evidence-Based Journey of Organizational Change and Development Through Human-Centered Design

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ABSTRACT

The author takes a systemic approach to organizational change and development applying organizational psychology, gestalt group dynamics, and their intersection with human-centered design. The intervention centers on senior leaders in an international, private sector company based in Singapore with global operations in over 60 countries. The company is going through significant change, a result of entering a period of loss making performance, a change in leadership, and digital disruption to their business model.

INTRODUCTION

This reflective case history is based upon my experience when I was employed as a practitioner in a central team responsible for Leadership, Team Effectiveness, Organization Development and Culture in the company that is featured in this case. The company is an international financial institution, focused on emerging markets with operations in over 60 countries, employing more than 85,000 employees. It has a proud history of over 150 years and was the first foreign bank in many of these markets. The people in this case are the senior leaders of one of the business units with global responsibility based in Singapore. The reflections are based upon my professional practice, the application of evidence-based leadership and culture change research and contextual observations about how the company was going through a significant change both internally, and within the industry. The question of purpose and relevance was high on peoples' minds and required me to address many of the 'sacred cows' within the company's culture, and work with leadership teams to help shift their narrative about the company. I will share my experience of taking a systemic approach to organizational change and development which draws

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-6155-2.ch049

upon the application of organizational psychology, gestalt group dynamics and their intersection with Human-Centered Design and some practical examples of different interventions that were designed as part of the change.

Organizational Context

The story begins with an organization that had been successful in the face of competition and a changing landscape both in terms of regulation and social sentiment. I had been in the company for over 5 years in a number of leadership development roles and therefore had access to observe and understand the culture and mindset of the leaders who had been with the organization for a long time as well as those who were newly hired. This contrast allowed me to notice how the culture was evolving and the different mindset of those who had essentially ‘grown up’ in the organization versus those bringing in external practices and experience.

The company had been continuously growing both in revenues, profits and employees over a sustained 10-year period. It had seemed to defy all notions of what other financial institutions were doing at the time. Unlike many of its OECD competitors it had continued to be successful during the Global Financial Crisis (GFC). Whilst the industry was in crisis wiping away many of its competitors which saw government bailouts, forced consolidation and bankruptcy it continued to steadily outperform its peers on almost every metric. It was the poster child for increasing shareholder returns and risk management in an era when trust in big business was being eroded. A stable management team was rewarded by the markets with a healthy share price and public backing for its disciplined execution of strategy and leadership. The clients were happy as they were being provided with funding to help grow and sustain their business when many other banks were much more inwardly focused trying to remain solvent and liquid. This presented a huge opportunity to deepen relationships which the company did successfully. As it did not have heavy exposure to the US and European markets it was riding high and that was the overall sentiment. There was a very different vibe to the place and definite pride in being differentiated from the pack.

During this period of success, I was clearly able to see the distinctions in the culture and people, much like a fish out of water as I had joined the company from a very different place. I say this because I believe one of the most important tools of a practitioner is being aware of our own state of mind and biases. They can impact our effectiveness and ability to see the system for what it is. The success of our interventions depends a lot on the interior conditions of the intervener. It was a very attractive company to join as jobs were disappearing at an alarming rate across the industry. The company, which was regarded as a second-tier institution, was now able to hire the best talent in the market to build new capabilities for it to continue to grow. It had a unique story that people wanted to be a part of. I was one of those people and joined from an US institution which did not fare so well in the GFC as it had been taken over to remain solvent. I therefore had first-hand experience of the brutal nature of the impact of a crisis. The ensuing Reduction-In-Force exercise to achieve cost efficiencies was a stark reminder of what is required in a commercial environment to meet the needs of stakeholders who judge success based upon economic values. This experience left me and many others with a very visceral experience of how individuals can become hostile when they are placed in an environment where they are under threat and need to compete with each other to maintain a role in an anxious system vs thriving in abundance, which I will come back to later.

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