

The U process as transformation tool

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Due to customer's privacy, the identity of the organisation described in this case study will remain anonymous.

Introduction

This paper describes the process of an organisation that decided it was necessary to improve leadership and teamwork in his Management Team (MT).

The organisation wanted to raise clarity of purpose, focus, better decision-making, uniting capabilities, working together, building on each other and learning to lead dialogues and conflicts.

At the beginning of the process, different business units were managed separately from the organisation as a whole. The lack of teamwork at management levels resulted in the MT not being able to support and enable the development of the organisation. The management team consists of 17 members and runs an organisation of approximately 5,000 employees.

A consultant was contracted to support and facilitate this process. The organisation was advised to implement an approach for the cultural transformation of the management team.

The purpose for this process was thus "to facilitate a transformation in the leadership team's behaviour to support the development of the organisation."

The approach

The approach used to facilitate this process was the 'U-curve'¹.

The U-curve was in the first place a tool to structure the interactions during the process which lead from March to November 2007. Secondly the U-curve enabled the organisation to "go a little bit deeper" and arrive at a conscious creative action, rather than defensive reaction which was the case in the present situation.

To support this process the consultant made use of the Art of Hosting². The challenge for the consultant was to use these 'soft' methods and technologies in a very technical organisation, where the 'hard' side was dominant.

The process

In this particular case the process consisted six phases, executed throughout six half day long team sessions. Before the start of each session specific 'core questions' were communicated and discussed with the CEO in a preparation meeting, together with his COO and HR- manager, also member of the MT.

The U-curve is designed to lead to a clear understanding and control over the cause of a problem. It's a tool that can lead to more conscious behaviour, higher quality of decision making and more accurate action.

¹ Otto scharmer

² www.artofhosting.org

The participants of the process were first invited to 'slow down', to look at themselves, their context and the world.

They were invited to find deepening and reflection by going down the U, so that they became 'present for that what wanted to emerge'.

The process sets the stage for participants to enable them to let go of the old and create space for the new. Going back up the U again shifts focus and awareness back to action and creation.

In short a change of behaviour.

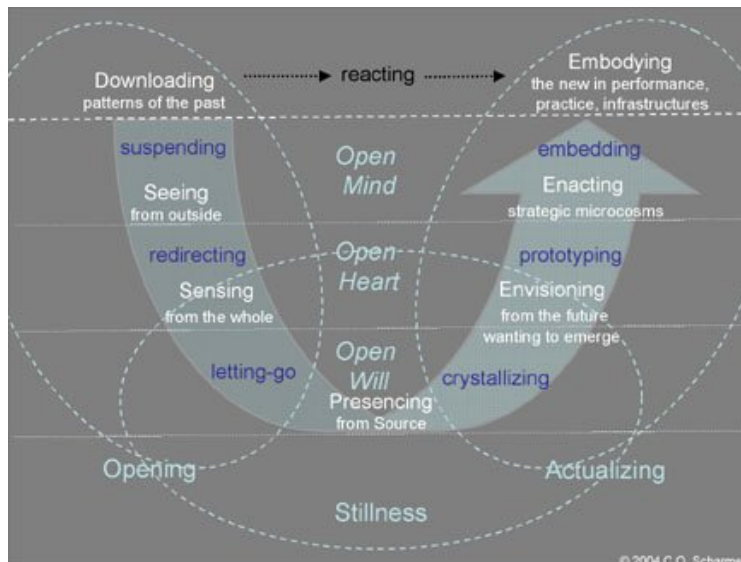


Illustration: The U-curve

Session 1 - Seeing the System

Question: What do you observe about the behaviour of the Management Team?

Practice: Circle and CultureScan.

Desired outcome: A consensus picture of the current and recent behaviour of the Management Team.

This first session resulted in the MT becoming aware of unwanted behaviours.

They became aware of, lack of commitment and responsibility. Lack of cooperative behaviour, ambition and work spirit. Procedures created more problems.

This behaviour was mainly visible during their meetings and collective decision making.

By acknowledging and reflecting on these issues, they created and shared a common commitment to change the situation.

Session 2 - Sensing from the Whole

Question: How does it feel to be part of this team at the moment? How does your current behaviour contribute to the old patterns that you want to leave behind?

Practice: Circle, Competing Commitments exercise

Desired outcome: What comes out of these questions are a consensus picture of the underlying patterns and beliefs that generate their behaviour.

The beginning of this second session was marked by a retrospective view on the last session. Characteristic here was a negative and defensive reflective behaviour. This check-in set the stage for personal reflections.

The team hesitated but succeeded in sharing their personal suffering of the situation.

“The emotion is the fuel for the fire and anger releases energy to create change”

The competing commitments exercise

Complaining is a way of caring and is fuelled by involvement. Competing commitment is a means of behaviour for avoiding deeper commitment. To get out of this struggle, it is important to see what happens when one lets go of the competing commitment, what is the worse case scenario?

The MT shared a deeper commitment for success. Their competing commitments were short term and individual actions, everyday business.

The team feared losing control, low quality, loss of staff members and going out of business. In short, they feared failure.

As result of this session, the following weeks, for the first time, the team had a positive discussion around a target that wasn't reached.

Session 3 - Learning Journey

Question: What are existing best practices in transforming leadership behaviour?

Practice: Visit to Leadership Team which has accomplished a similar transformation.

Desired outcome: Learning from a best practice in transforming leadership behaviour.

The learning journey offers the opportunity to witness a similar positive and possible change elsewhere, which can stimulate own change behaviour. The MT visited a company where a similar transformation process was experienced.

The beginning of this third session was marked by a retrospective view on the last progress of the process till the present moment.

Characteristic was a change in behaviour concerning communication and cooperation. They learned to ask each other for help, communicated more openly but were still experiencing difficulty addressing undesired behaviour. They still felt restricted by day to day business.

The learning journey led to positive feedback, the team considered the journey educational and inspirational.

The CEO was less positive, he didn't believe his organisation capable of a similar transformation. He believed this was because of the rigid organisational structure.

Session 4 – Presenting & Envisioning

Question: Who are we? What is our work? What would this team look and feel like in the future? What steps would we have taken to get there?

Practice: Sitting body relaxation, meditation and questions. Vision work with back casting.

Desired outcome: Inventory of current people in team and qualities and competencies. Vision of Future and Path.

During this session the participants were invited to investigate their own (professional) place and role in the organisation, to reflect on their own values and core qualities.

They were invited to be totally present and focus on this exercise.

The team communicated its awkwardness of the resulting silence before they shared their insights and reflections.

Characteristic was the immediate loss of presence the moment the session was over.

The team immediately started to check mails, make calls and tried to get some work done.

This behaviour demonstrated their lack of responsibility and highlighted their competing commitments.

Future vision and back casting

In this exercise the team envisioned the future; they lively imagined the success of their organisation and described what they saw and how this felt.

The exercise enabled the team to regain faith, inspiration and hope for the future.

After this energetic exercise, they checked out the session with a description of the action each member personally took in the future to enable the change.

This final question offered the opportunity to really commit to an action, to a step that would perhaps facilitate the needed change.

Some of the visions resulted in immediate action in communication policy.

As feedback the CEO as well as the team again expressed their awkwardness with the silence that resulted from the presencing session.

Session 5 - Crystallising

Question: What are the core principles? What are the values? And what are the barriers preventing them to live their principles and values?

Practice: Appreciative Inquiry exercise. Cultural Transformation Tools from Richard Barrett.

Desired outcome: Core principles, list of barriers preventing change and strategies for engaging them.

This exercise consisted of investigating what the conditions and important patterns of a positive past experience were.

The successful conditions in a successful experience were then turned into core principles. After an hour work, the MT came up with a list of 17 principles around how they would like to work together. Then they ranked the principles by order of importance.

This session generated energy. Compared to the earlier session where the silence was most present, the atmosphere was this time cheerful. After the session the results from the assessment were presented.

The information showed a big inconsistency between the personal values and the values of the organisation. Characteristic was that the MT was more negative and pessimistic than the staff members.

The results showed forty-three percent of entropy in the MT itself, which is the highest mismatch possible between the current culture and the desired culture.

The results of the values scan affected all the members of the MT. This was a very powerful moment in the process, a moment of realisation.

A discussion flowered about how to deepen their principles, how to strengthen their team. They were eager to find out how they could create an anchor to remind themselves of this session.

The values results had such an impact that they decided to use a peddle as symbol and as a process intervention tool during their management meetings.

The direction this time reflected positive on the last step.

Session 6 - Prototyping and Learning

Question: How can we experiment with working in this new way (cultural and structural)? What learning infrastructure do we need in place to keep developing the prototypes?

Practice: Change conditions (Spiral Dynamics), Kolb's learning cycle

Desired outcome: Commitments to experiments; action plan to set up learning infrastructure; next steps.

This was the last session, the end of the U process and the start of the team's independent process without expert advice.

The MT was introduced with a working model about the conditions for change and the learning cycle. The MT was given the opportunity to look structurally at the barriers that were keeping them from changing and to look back to their guiding principles to analyse them further.

The team worked in small groups and ideas for actions were presented to each other. They decided to deepen and thicken the principles and find a way to keep them alive, and agreed on pursuing the learning they started together with monthly sessions. They got enthusiastic to create space for conversations in some sort of buddy teams.

Specialist groups formed to address different problems in order to create more time and space for process related issues during MT meetings.

They were eager to re-evaluate themselves on their values in a few months.

They found a way to share their guiding principles with the personnel and asked them for feedback on the behaviour of the MT.

Looking back on the U process the team was very positive and eager to continue the change process. They experienced difficulties with the dept of the process but had an overall gain of energy and quality in the team.

The results

What follows below is the situation in the organisation two months after the closing of the last session as described above.

After the last session, the MT members held on to the agreements they set for themselves.

A small group worked on the principles and came back to the whole team with a proposal around what their guiding principles were going to be. This resulted in six principles they all agreed upon. The six principles are shown on walls in many meeting rooms in the form of placemats. They use the principles as guideline and intervention tool during their meetings.

The MT now also discusses the process. The quality of the meetings has increased.

They continued their monthly learning sessions. Every session covers a theme that matters in the current situation (e.g. leadership).

They decided to keep working in small (expert) groups because it worked well earlier in the process; it allows more space for good discussions.

The first session they had was about their collective purpose and their right to exist as an organisation. This meeting clarified why there was such a discrepancy between the team members. They agreed upon one purpose and create two slogans in order to keep the purpose alive for themselves.

And finally, their peddle is beautifully exposed as a symbol in the boardroom.

Up to today however, not everyone in the team is acting consistently according to the principles and what they have learned from the process.

Approximately, seventy five percent of the team did really make a step, but the rest keeps being cynical.

The behavioural change in the MT has not lead to a change in culture yet that is visible in the rest of the organisation. Neither can the organisation already claim concrete results in meeting their targets. Ultimately they know that it will lead to better results. They believe they've laid down some good foundations.

Reflections & conclusion

The U process has been proven of good use for the start of the transformation process that continues till today. However considering the organisations feedback and the relapses during the in between weeks, in this case, it would have been advisable to have a shorter time span between the sessions. They would probably have gone down the U more naturally and more easily.

What we can learn from this case is that it is extremely important that the leaders of an organisation take the same responsibility they also expect from their employees and vice versa. A leader can not expect from his staff members and employees to take up the task of change of behaviour without setting a visible example.

In classical planning or development through change projects, it is safe to steer on output, results. Results are well defined in the project plans. It is remarkable however that research shows that eighty percent of these projects fail. The results as stated in the plans are simply never realized.

In change by means of working with the U process it's in fact all about change of behaviour on the work floor.

When you want a new culture with different behaviour, colleagues need to address each other on undesired or old behaviour. This is a perfect example of horizontal steering.

I believe that a lot of culture change doesn't meet its goals because of a lack of this horizontal steering.

In this particular case seventy five percent adopted the new behaviour. It is my opinion that, if the organisation wants to successfully change its culture, they consistently need to address and confront the twenty five percent who's not showing the new behaviour.