

Healing the Starfish

When the Symphony Orchestra Institute invited me to participate in its Scholar in Residence program, I was both pleased and apprehensive. While I had three decades of experience as a professor of organizational behavior and as a consultant to a wide range of organizations, I had not worked with orchestra organizations and knew little about them. I sensed, too, that my presence and involvement as a learner would not be invisible, and would inevitably have some effect on the organization—hopefully a positive one.

In retrospect, the residency experience with the Oregon Symphony did give me a unique opportunity to learn about this organization, and to some extent, about orchestra organizations in general. There are some ways, too, in which I was able to serve as a sounding board for the individuals and groups I interviewed. I sensed as we talked that their experiences, perceptions, and assumptions were being amplified, reverberated, and made more available for reflection and self-awareness.

Tim Scott, who was then chair of the orchestra committee, was part of a group doing ongoing planning for my visits, and he arranged meetings with the committee he chaired. Fred Sautter was very helpful in arranging informal gatherings with musicians representing a range of views—including people who perhaps would otherwise not have agreed to talk with me at the time. I also simply sat in and observed a number of regular meetings.

Listening and Learning

When I observed group meetings, my approach was to attend to what each group was attempting to do and how it was doing it. I was openly curious about the task and function of each group, in the context of the larger organization. This is essentially a neutral stance—not particularly looking for problems to solve or improvements to suggest, but simply noting the group's behavior as it is. Similarly, in talking with individuals I was interested in understanding their unique ways of perceiving and experiencing themselves and the organization.

I learned of the successful growth and development of the Oregon Symphony over the last two decades, under the visionary musical leadership of James

De Preist and two other uniquely talented and energetic conductors—Norman Leyden and Murry Sidlin. The transition to new musical leadership, however, was not evident to me at the time.

I heard in great detail about a history of difficult experiences related to financial pressures, a painful strike, operational snafus, the limitations of the concert hall, and low morale among many members of the orchestra. As I talked with musicians, board members, managers and administrative staff, and volunteers, I became aware of a low level of trust between individuals and groups. I noticed, too, a number of ways in which distrustful assumptions and group stereotyping were leading to a high incidence of misunderstandings, which only fed the mistrust and stress people were experiencing.

I recognized this pattern as one that is endemic to other kinds of organizations—whether in the arts, service, manufacturing, or technology; I have certainly seen it before. Many organizations have functionally separate constituent groups, such as marketing, operations, and finance—or in this case, the orchestra, management and staff, the board of directors, and volunteer organizations.

There is a tendency for each group to develop its own subculture and shared assumptions. The other groups are seen as adversaries, their members are stereotyped, and their motives are suspect. They each have their own priorities and ways of working. They are often housed in separate buildings and may seldom work together or even see each other.

Under these conditions it is not unusual to develop patterns of adversarial distrust for the other groups. When people are caught in such patterns they tend to personalize the problem as being caused by the other side—as a group or as individuals. The underlying fragmenting structures, however, are not acknowledged or understood; they hear the notes but not the music.

The Vicious Circle

This kind of repetitive pattern can be understood as a vicious circle (or more technically, a regenerating feedback loop). A high-stress/high-pressure environment tends to breed incomplete or distorted communication. This leads to frequent misunderstandings, which feed mistrust, which in turn amplify the pressure and stress, and so on. People caught in such a vicious circle tend to feel trapped and hopeless. And indeed, if no change is introduced, things only get worse.

But there is a hopeful irony in discovering such feedback loops, because for the same reason that they work in one direction they can work in the opposite direction—toward improvement. For example, if new activities or structures provide opportunities for valid communication across groups, there can be more mutual understanding, which allows trust to build. This leads to reduced stress, which in turn reduces the tendency to miscommunicate and misunderstand, and so on.

The story of the starfish that Lynn Loacker describes was my attempt to explore with her, and then others at the Oregon Symphony, the possibility of shifting attention to the underlying patterns in their dilemma. It is a very dramatic metaphor in the sense that it describes a fundamentally self-destructive pattern. She and others resonated strongly to the starfish metaphor, to a large extent because it connected with and supported their own emerging awareness of the nature of the problem. Indeed, activities like the 2000 Plus Committee and the Collaborative Task Force were structured specifically to bring constituent groups together around shared values and goals. These seemed to me to be very positive and productive initiatives, attesting to Lynn Loacker's perceptive leadership.

Similarly, the search for a new president was guided and informed by a participative process across constituent groups. The fortunate selection of Tony Woodcock for the position reflects the shared awareness of the importance of moving toward a style of management that supports healing of old wounds and collaborating across constituencies. Indeed, he provided the needed leadership in the strategic planning process that has developed a new sense of direction for the whole organization, and a framework for continuing monitoring and decision making over the critical next few years. Again, the fact that a strategic plan was developed not by a few managers in a board room, but through an open process that brought together all the constituencies in a large-group format is indicative of his competent and effective leadership away from fragmentation and toward integration.

The same can be said for the wise initiative to use Interest-Based Bargaining. Rather than waiting for contract talks to begin and to predictably deteriorate into adversarial polarization, IBB has provided a forum for cooperative problem-solving toward shared goals. The monumental time commitment involved has been an investment in mutual understanding and healing.

The transformative process is not over, though it has developed a significant momentum. Perhaps the starfish, with its healing nerve ring, is beginning to function and thrive as a whole organism.

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