

Facilitating Something New - Like Story

“In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few”
- From Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind by Shunryu Suzuki

Abstract:

Many HR and L&D practitioners will find themselves inspired to try out new approaches in working with their groups and teams but the first problem they will encounter is the self-talk “Can I really do it?”. This article takes an old approach like ‘story’ and tells of the journey a new practitioner might take to over coming this kind of self-talk.

Is Beginners Mind Enough?

So you’re interested in trying something new. Working with a group on something that sounds great - you love the idea of it and where it might just take you - and the group, but how do you do it?

In Zen they talk of “beginners mind”. The mind that first encounters something. And all that goes along with that. Can you imagine the first time you attempted riding a bike? The first time you gave a public presentation? The first time you tried baking a cake? The first time you tried to juggle? Your first job interview? How did you learn how to learn?

Some of the secret might be in the ‘beginners mind’ and being open to learning, but is it enough? What part does culture play in the introduction of a new approach with a group? What kind of culture would repel ‘newness’ just like an immune system might? What could be learnt at this boundary? Could the very approach of successfully introducing a new approach into a group at the same time provide a cultural intervention? What if an organization is really committed to learning? Would they face problems? Could there still be resistance? What could be learnt from the resistance encountered?

Take for instance Story. It is such a rich word. How many different connections and thoughts are evoked for you with the word “story”.

Bed time stories.
You’re just telling stories.
Life Story.



<http://www.babelfishgroup.com>

HiStory.

And then - what goes through someones mind if you say 'we are going to work with Story today?'. What are your own perceptions about it? How is a story told any different from your telling of a personal experience?

What if you could avoid all this by simply getting to work with what you need to? And need to do.

One less thing.

But you want to use this great so called new approach of Story. Where do you start?

"Getting to B"

After working with Bob Dick in one of our recent "Journeying with Story" workshops we were chatting and reflecting on it when I had a thankful flash of insight. It was how one of the strengths of working with story is how it helps to prepare people for where they are going - not just about being where they've been.

Instead of being so process focused, what might happen if you think about how is this helping us get to B. That next place.

So you're at A. What will you do, intentionally, to get to B?

Small Steps

An easy trap to fall into as a facilitator keen to try out something new is taking steps which are too big. Your enthusiasm for this new thing gets in the way and you wish for others to 'get it' and to engage and maybe even be at that place you've imagined it would/could lead too. Before you know it - you've lost them. Or worse.

This is the time to take small steps.

Deconstruct.

Find those small steps which are doable right in the here and now. They say a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. See how this approach takes you, the group and your conceptions into some whole new territory...

But where to start?

The truth is that we've been using story in our lives for thousands of years and I'm sure it'll continue for a thousand more. Some even say we should have been called "Homo Narrans" - the story telling ape. Though Oliver Sacks challenges that in Musicophilia. Nevertheless...

A friend comes in and says "I just had the most amazing experience" you ask "What happened?". You've just asked a story eliciting question.

You see a colleague wearing a new piece of jewellery - she tells how she bought it in Egypt on a recent trip. A story is unfolding.

You're facilitating a strategic planning retreat with a group of state CEO's, board members and national and state managers. You notice some strange body language going on between the CEO's and wonder what story is about to unfold in the here and now.

But why does it feel so weird though?

So you get all of this so far. But it just feels strange. You think to yourself "So I'm going to see if I can invite people to share stories. I'm being intentional about which "B" I'm looking to get too. But this still feels weird".

One of the reasons may be that in organizations today there is a type of talk which is all-too-common. It's known as Institutional talk and it's characterized by being very goal focused. Transactional you could say. And this brings us to the nub of what's different about the story telling environment.

There's a term in conversational linguistics (thanks to Sash my wife) that is called "Turn taking". If you imagine how a discussion may unfold within a group, whenever an individual speaks they 'take a turn'. In typical organizational speaking you will find that the turn taking dynamics are quick and short. Maybe machine gun like? Back and forward, transactional turn taking.

Inviting stories changes this form of turn taking. To tell a story (or an experience) an individual needs to take a longer turn than the usual. This means you were right. Setting up a story telling environment does feel weird because it involves creating a different to normal turn taking environment.

How might you navigate and introduce this change? Our "Getting to B" principle of intentional facilitation suggests that it could be as simple as you modeling the



type of environment. In modeling you create it. What if you were to tell a story to begin with?

About the Author

Since completing his PhD in mathematics and community ecology at the University of Queensland in June 1999, Andrew Rixon has had international experience working with organisations within Australia, USA, the Netherlands and the UK. Andrew is Director of Babel Fish Group, a boutique Australian based group of management consultants specializing in the application of facilitative processes to help organizations and individuals transform.

Andrew can be contacted by email: Andrew@babelfishgroup.com