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Further Reading, 'The Art of Dialogue', (extract) – William Isaacs

Introduction

Bill introduces the “four-player model,” a system for understanding the structures that lie behind group behaviour, first developed by family systems therapist David Kantor. The dynamics of “movers, opposers, followers, and bystanders” not only characterizes a field of interdependent actions, they point to interdependent roles we tacitly assume... the interplay of these archetypal roles have inspired great stories... for a very long time.

Viewed from the perspective of dialogue, an interesting finding emerged: a healthy “ecology of thought” is characterized by the presence of all four roles. In other words, there need to be:

- followers – “I support this idea”
- movers – (this is what I suggest we do next...”
- opposers – “I do not agree, and let me explain why”
- bystanders – “here is how I am hearing where we seem to be going”

In genuine dialogue, these are not static roles. Rather, people more or less naturally take on new roles as needed when they sense the need for a shift of energy in the conversation. By contrast most of our workplace conversations are characterized by rigid roles: by all movers, pushing past one another to champion their views; by disabled bystanders, paralyzed at not being able to bring their voice; or by cowed followers, fearful of offering anything but the meekest agreement to the voices of authority.

- (from the forward) Peter M. Senge

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Kantor's Four Player System

David Kantor, through his work as a clinician in the field of family systems therapy, has developed a powerful theory that suggests that conversations reflect innate structures that only partly step from the individual's needs. They also reflect the unspoken needs of the group and the situation. To Kantor, people take a stance not because they intend to, but because the conversation needs someone to fill that role. By using Kantor's powerful model... we can become attuned to these hidden (needs)... Kantor's model reveals four fundamentally different kinds of action within a group.

- Movers** When someone makes a *move*, they are *initiating* an action. They carry, at least for the moment, the focus of the conversation.
- Followers** Another person listening to this initial proposal might *agree* and what to support what is being says. This person says so, and symbolically comes close to the first person. The second person could be said to be *following* the first.
- Opposers** A third person, watching these two agree, may think to him- or herself, 'There is something not quite right with this picture.' He or she steps in and *opposes* them, *challenging* what they are saying or proposing. Symbolically, this person might stand between the first two.
- Bystand** Finally, a fourth person, who has been *observing* the entire situation, and who has the advantage of having one foot in and one foot out of the circumstance, describes from his perspective what he has seen and heard. This person may propose a way of thinking and seeing that *expands everyone's vision*, and could be called a *bystander*. He or she adds a valuable dimension to the conversation... they provide perspective instead of taking a stand.

"A healthy conversation, argues Kantor, consists of all four of these actions being used in balance. None is left out. And all the people in the conversation find themselves free to occupy any of the four positions at any time. They are not bound by informal and unspoken rules imposed either by the system or by themselves... When two people are caught in a move / oppose "he said, she said" conversation, others head for cover and go silent.

(If) some of the four positions in a conversation are silenced, or, as Kantor calls them, "disabled: a disabled bystander sees what is happening in a group but doesn't do anything about it. A disabled opposer cannot offer correction to or challenge what is happening. Any system that silences bystanders and opposers is by definition in trouble... as vital information will not be shared and people will go underground with their views." - Bill Isaacs

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Activity: Can you spot the four voices in this extract from *Dances With Wolves*?

Context – Kevin Costner (an actor) lights an enormous fire, and the smoke that billows from the fort alerts the Native People that a white man is present; as they say, only a white man would announce his presence in so clumsy a fashion. Shortly afterward twenty or so Native elders hold a conversation circle in a tepee, where they speak about Costner’s arrival and its potential ramifications on their ways of living. This conversation, you must realise, represents a cultural crisis of high order – a potential threat to their territory and existence.

Wind In His Hair: (a young warrior): I do not care for this talk about a white man. Whatever he is, he is not Sioux and that makes him less. When I hear that more whites are coming I want to laugh.

Kicking Bird: (an older veteran – holding up his hand to quiet the group) Wind In His Hair’s words are strong and I have heard them. It’s true the whites are a poor race and hard to understand. But make no mistake – the whites are coming.

Wind In His Hair: (standing) Kicking Bird is always looking ahead and that is good. But this man is nothing to us. I will take some men. We will shoot some arrows into this man. If he truly has medicine, he will not be hurt. If he has no medicine, he will be dead.

Medicine Man: (seated, quiet, he waits and then speaks) No man can tell another what to do. But killing a white man is a delicate matter. If you kill one, more are sure to come.

Chief: (also seated, raises his hand, speaks very slowly, calmly) It is easy to become confused by these questions. It’s hard to know what to do. We should talk about this some more.

What are your strengths and weaknesses? Are you able, particularly in high-stakes circumstances, to play one of these four roles well? Which one of the four roles needs toning and strengthening? Which one gets you in trouble?

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