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Scripturient: Rewriting Literacies

Psychodynamic literacies

HIDDEN agendas. Unconscious desires. Unspoken assumptions. This column is about new kinds of literacy. If we were better at reading the forces that shape our relationships, could we rewrite them to get better, happier outcomes?

Tony Berendt is a leadership coach and former executive medical director with the National Health Service. For him, group dynamics are “like an iceberg – you see some of the relationship on the surface and then there is also everything beneath the water. There are the explicit, seen, and formal aspects; then all that is implicit, unseen, unspoken, and even unconscious.”

A conduit for problems

At the NHS, Tony often found himself trying to deal with fraught situations in teams operating under great pressure.

“In my role,” he says, “I was acting as a conduit for the organisation’s problems. When you are a leader in a difficult situation, it isn’t all about you. It is partly also about what the organisation seeks to make you carry on its behalf.”

Training with a coach who took a psychodynamic approach, Tony began to pay attention to what he was feeling, and whether those emotions came from within him, or from other parts of the organisation.

“The leader is the recipient of projected hopes and fears,” he says, giving the example of feeling incredibly pressed for time when he began his executive role.

“I felt that I might have a time management problem,” he explains – but his coach asked him to reconsider. “If that was the case, then why would the organisation have appointed you? Why might things be organised in such

a way that the medical director was under great pressure of time? Why might the organisation want their medical director to fail?”

Together, Tony and the coach reflected that failure on the director’s part would mean that there was no change in the organisational culture. The director would take the blame for failure to change, and no one else would have to suffer.

Like Tony, Brendan Schutte was drawn to focus on organisations and relationships after long experience dealing with disagreements and grievances in his role as a human resources professional.

Reframing

Brendan now works as a mediator and consultant. One of the techniques he uses to address problematic relationships is called reframing. It releases people from cycles of conflict by encouraging them to change their perspective and find new ways to interpret a given situation.

Instead of considering ourselves the hero of our own story, and those we are in conflict with as villains, Brendan encourages people in troubled relationships to “rewrite the script”, finding an account of the situation and a way forward which positively addresses all parties’ underlying needs.

He says: “Reframing a situation and resolving a conflict is also an opportunity to be compassionate, identifying a way forward which works for all concerned. Even situations where there has been some really difficult behaviour can sometimes be resolved in a way which accommodates the wants and needs of all parties.”

For Tony, “This means that we can sometimes take some of the heat out of relationship issues – it’s not about you being bad and me being good, it’s



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about focussing on the relationship that has developed between us. If I make a small change in how I relate to you, the relationship shifts, and that may allow you to make changes too.”

The needs of people

Both Brendan and Tony note that this work isn’t about regurgitating psychological theories, it’s about attending to the needs of people working together. While in some circumstances you may seek the help of a professional consultant or mediator, Tony says that starting is simple.

“It starts by being attentive to the relationship between individuals, anxieties that they may have in life, and specific anxieties that might relate to tasks they are given as part of their organisational role.”

“For information professionals, that might include concerns about the nature of knowledge, knowledge as power, the control of access to knowledge. It might raise issues around professional identity and all the technological changes from physical collections to digital storage and access. It might be about the changing environment of the library, and how it feels to inhabit that changing physical space as a worker.” **IP**