



FoOD For Thought Series: *British Broadcasting Corporation*

Reflections of an OD practitioner: Lessons learnt from the BBC culture change

by The Institute of Leadership and Organisation Development

About 20 years ago, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), faced one of its toughest challenges.

The global television giant was sluggish, mired in costly bureaucracy and unresponsive due to multiple layers of management, an overly complex system and was afraid of taking risks.

Frustrated by the way the organisation had become, then director-general of the BBC, Greg Dyke decided to turn the organisation around. The company started cutting costs and streamlined its business, while improving teamwork.¹

However, in doing so, staff felt that they were less valued and that this new structure stifled their creativity. Viewership ratings also suffered.

As a result, the BBC engaged in a second systemwide culture-change programme in 2002, when it announced a five-year goal to become the most creative organisation in the world. This meant more than cosmetic changes to its programmes and policies, but an alignment of the BBC's strategic decisions to its organisational system.

To help them, they desired to hire an external organisation development consultant, OD guru Mee Yan Cheung-Judge, to facilitate the process.

At that time, Ms Cheung-Judge knew that only two strategies would work.² The first was using appreciative inquiry – which focuses on building the positive aspects of an organisation - as the main approach to tap into the BBC's strengths.

¹ Bunker, Barbara Benedict and Alban, Billie T. *The Handbook of Large Group Methods: Creating Systemic Change in Organizations and Communities*. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 45.

² Cheung-Judge, Mee Yan.

The second was to use internal people to lead up front to embed any new cultural change. A total of 17,000 people were involved in the culture change exercise altogether.

As Ms Cheung-Judge saw the project to the end, some of the personal lessons that she had learnt were:

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PRACTITIONERS'S ABILITY TO HOLD ON TO A VISION DURING THE UPS AND DOWNS OF A PROJECT

As practitioners, we not only help our leaders hold onto the vision for the transformation, but also develop a clear vision for the project ourselves.³

Often, our leaders may not be able to grasp the vision strongly for a number of reasons, including power dynamics (especially between their own position and other power figures); the political reality, the grip of the existing paradigm; or the over-familiarity of the cultural context.

However, our job as OD practitioners is to hold a vision clearly in our own mind for the system – especially when the current reality prevents visionary thinking – and then work out the best way to engage our stakeholders and leaders in the process, helping them to move step-by-step towards that vision.

For Ms Cheung-Judge, adopting the AI method would help the BBC vastly. However, holding onto that vision of AI for the BBC meant working hard to persuade key organisational leaders to buy into the vision piece-by-piece, despite the fact that it was never clear whether or not the process would pay off.

In retrospect, the persistence that she had placed on holding onto her vision paid off. If Ms Cheung-Judge and her colleagues given up and caved in to the fear of failure, the change programme would never have worked.

INCREASE TOLERANCE FOR AMBIGUITY

According to Ms Cheung-Judge, ambiguity is the constant and predictable factor throughout any change project.⁴

³ Ibid, 1. 57.

⁴ Ibid, 1. 58.



Often, practitioners will find themselves living in what she terms the “in-between space”, the incessant “not sure”, the ubiquitous “maybe”, the duality of being “I am right and so is she”. This state of the unknown truly tested her limits when dealing with multiple paradigms, personalities, and preferences of those at the BBC.

What she learnt was this: That not giving into the urge to terminate the consultant-client relationship prematurely because of the ambiguity led to unimaginably positive results.

Throughout the process, resolutions to difficult decisions often turned out to be what was needed at the time. This occurred because of the patient and consistent practice of not rushing into a premature decision.

As Ms Cheung-Judge went on with helping the BBC, the voice of their 17,000 employees resounded strongly in the AI interventions. Employees voted for their top priorities for changing the BBC’s culture, resulting in a more creative and engaged organisation.

Food For Thought:

While executing cultural change, an OD practitioner should:

- Hold on to the vision throughout the change project.
- Increase tolerance for ambiguity.



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