

Abstract:

In this case study, an approach to facilitating feedback of sensitive interview and focus group data during team-building is discussed. The purpose of this methodology is to enable the consultant to uncover and help a team address hidden assumptions and judgments with less defensiveness than is the typical team reaction to feedback of sensitive interpersonal data. The outcome is one that provides the potential for improved working relationships and renewed understanding and trust within a team.

Keywords:

- Facilitation
- Team-building
- Scenarios
- Team Resistance
- Team Feedback
- Critical Incidents

TEAM BUILDING USING BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS

BACKGROUND

Sennett (1998)¹ argues that “the new cooperative ethos of teamwork sets in place as masters those ‘facilitators’ and ‘process managers’ who dodge truthful engagement with their servants” (p. 117). He describes as “superficial” the evasion of responsibility that takes place when those with power over others fail to take authority, making “change” the scapegoat for decisions that have been made by those in power. He supports this premise by citing the “fiction” that workers are asked to believe that they and managers are on the same team, that power resides in “peer pressure from other workers on [the] work team” (p. 113) and that a leader merely “manages group process” and “is on your side, rather than your ruler” (p. 111). The impact on team members’ relationships and their commitment to their jobs is as a consequence no more than acting “because it obliges individuals to manipulate their appearances and behaviors with others” (p. 112). They indulge in team meetings in which they “hold one another accountable” by engaging “in what reads like group therapy - a therapy oriented to the bottom line” (p. 113). He describes this ritual as “superficiality” because of the “avoidance of resistance and deflection of confrontation”. “Domination” is wielded subversively through focus on the immediate moment which leaves no time for “[d]eeper shared commitments, loyalties and trust” (p. 115).

His conclusion is that portable skills and flexibility are gained in what has become “a turnstile world of work” (p. 112).

The reduction in mutual commitment between organization and employee has been recognizable in a tighter skills market and continued reorganization and job reductions. However, Sennett’s perspective of “corrosion of character” is not the only potential outcome. Another is that trust and openness can occur even

¹ Sennett, R., 1998, *The Corrosion of Character*. New York: Norton

TEAM BUILDING USING BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS

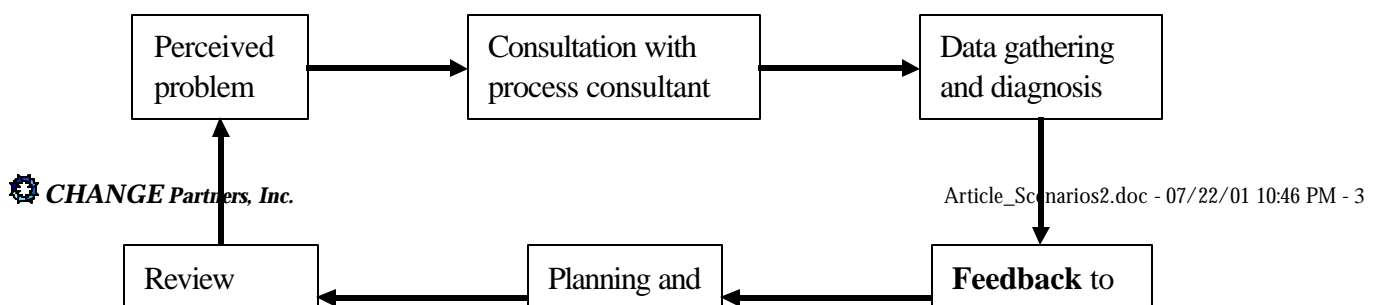
in a potentially transitory relationship although there is a need on occasions for a facilitated intervention to respond to the underlying causes of a team's ineffectiveness. The case study described in this paper is one that shows how unexpected degrees of openness can be engendered constructively through facilitated team meetings. The approach includes techniques of facilitation that can help team members to break through barriers and create a broader understanding of each others' positions in order to increase the trust, respect and effective team partnering that create business results and a more desirable work environment for those involved.

THE TEAM INTERVENTION

Assuming that teams can work effectively and can overcome the issues of hierarchy, accountability and uncertain tenure, there is potential for team interventions, often at the request of the team leader. By simplifying French's (1968)² action research model for organization development, as shown in Figure One, a conceptual framework for team intervention was determined prior to undertaking a team intervention.

The process involves a client recognizing a problem or opportunity for change and seeking the help of a process consultant, who then undertakes diagnosis and feedback to client and client's team. The team is involved in planning a means to achieve the desired state and implementing the plan of action. Ongoing or milestone reviews are undertaken to determine whether and how to remain on course or to invite back the process consultant and start another cycle of action research.

Figure 1 – Action Research Model adapted from French (1969)



TEAM BUILDING USING BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS

In one example of the above process at work the manager's boss played a sponsorship role. He asked that an intervention be conducted to restore harmony in a team with three levels of staff. His perception was that the employees whose tasks were clerical, data input and report generating, had been suffering from conflict between members, complaints about unfair promotions, excessive work arising from positions being eliminated and weak first-line supervision. He felt that the team manager might be blaming competent team members for inappropriate attitudes and behaviors which were in reality the consequence of that manager's own actions.

As process consultants, we met with the manager and found him to be open-minded to the intervention, having found himself in the midst of a sequence of biweekly team meetings which had degenerated into "gripe sessions" about changes in direction and other management decisions. His goal was to be open-minded and try to find a way to restore team effectiveness. He agreed to a diagnostic process which would involve splitting team members into three groups. The first two would be focus groups comprising six members each. The third group would be a feedback session involving the manager himself

² Adapted from French, W. L., "Organization Development: Objectives, Assumptions and Strategies, California Management

TEAM BUILDING USING BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS

and his four direct reports, all at the same level - three of them first-line managers and one an individual contributor.

The two focus groups took the format of six team members and lead process consultant sitting in a circle. Additionally, three scribes sat at the side of the group and in turn wrote onto cards the key words that were used by group members in response to questions. The cards were stuck on the surrounding walls. During a break in the two-hour session, the scribes arranged the cards into themes which were fed back to the group in order to gain agreement.

The questions asked were based on the initial situation analysis. The intent was to elicit the team's perspectives on issues raised by the first two managers. The questions included:

- ◆ “How are you managed?”
- ◆ “How appropriately is the department resourced”
- ◆ “What incidents have caused friction in the team?”
- ◆ “How does the team communicate?”
- ◆ “What is the role of the boss's boss?”

Each group member in turn was asked to respond to each question. A typical response was:

“Since the headcount reductions, people are frustrated that the job titles and grades for those who have remained here are the same. Managers expect personal sacrifices of people and there is little appreciation of their hard work and long hours. Some people are so stressed that they only do what they can in the time available. Some are even ‘dusting off their resumes’.”

Another member might add: *“Our managers have told us that to deal with our excessive workload we should standardize, and push back on anyone who asks for the unusual. But our managers don't push back themselves. In fact, they make commitments on our behalf. When we do*

TEAM BUILDING USING BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS

push back, [our managers] ask us why we can't be more cooperative and flexible. We ask for help but [they] leave us to puzzle things out for ourselves."

These comments were not dissimilar to those we had heard when conducting one-on-one interviews. However, the dynamic of validating the data in a group was powerful, and in itself reduced the need for feedback from the consultant. The reduced tendency of the group to "shoot the messenger" for sharing potentially threatening information was facilitated by the powerful image of a wall full of cards containing raw data from the group's responses. As the session continued and the group saw that their comments were being taken seriously their openness grew. The main ground-rule used was that confidentiality about the content of the group session would be maintained until there was a full team meeting. However, team members were free to talk to their colleagues about what the experience was like and what process was used. The wording on the cards could be typed up and fed back to the management team without attribution to any individual. Group members would receive and store confidentially a copy of the document.

The process was repeated at the second focus group. This time there was a new dynamic. Members were explicit about the behaviors of one team member, who had attended the first session, and the impact of her behaviors on the rest of the team. While listening, the facilitator probed for the interviewee's underlying assumptions, conclusions and judgments. Potential critical incidents were identified in early interviews for further exploration in later ones.

NEED FOR A NEW METHODOLOGY

For team building sessions with other groups, the consultants' dilemma had been to report back team members' data in a way that was both honest and acceptable to the team. Usually, after interviewing team members, we would analyze the data collected to identify trends, and present themes back to the team in the

TEAM BUILDING USING BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS

format of “key issues and opportunities”. There was invariably a trade-off between the emotion of what was said, often about other people, in a one-on-one interview and what, in the cold light of day, the team could accept and discuss publicly. The more we repeated sensitive and controversial data collected in interviews, the more likely it was that we as facilitators would be shot down. As Burke (1994, p. 177)³ puts it, “an OD consultant’s role can be a lonely one”. He writes that member’s anxieties stem from “accuracy of perception” and “choice of intervention”. One alternative to this data feedback approach is to avoid raising tough issues. While tempting, this does not enhance team cohesiveness and is disappointing to those with the expectation that tough issues will be confronted.

A core value that underlies our practice is that uncovering and reporting back sensitive information is essential to coaching, performance feedback, development planning and teambuilding. Too often, we have been disappointed by dilution of the real message through multiple interpretations of questionnaire responses and integrated interview analysis. The counterproductive response that we fear is what Argyris (1990, p. 10)⁴ calls “defensive reasoning”, in which team members continue to hold invalid premises, illogical inferences, or untested conclusions. Perception takes the guise of reality. So what more can be done?

A NEW APPROACH

We have overcome the natural tendency people have to avoid dealing with potentially sensitive subjects by using a new approach to team development called BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS. Among the benefits of Behavioral Scenarios over traditional approaches to reporting back data are that they:

³ Burke, W. W., 1994, *Organization Development: A Process of Learning and Changing*, 2nd Ed., Addison-Wesley: Reading, MA.

⁴ Argyris, C., 1990, *Overcoming Organizational Defenses: Facilitating Organizational Learning*, Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

TEAM BUILDING USING BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS

- ◆ help avoid the ‘shoot the messenger’ syndrome by allowing people to accept more readily difficult and sensitive information about themselves,
- ◆ get tough issues on the table in a way that they can be discussed productively,
- ◆ quickly create shared meaning among team members, and
- ◆ summarize messy feedback in an understandable way without losing significance.

In the next section, Behavioral Scenarios are described and illustrated in the context of the previous case study as a new approach to improving teams and enhancing performance.

FEELINGS EXPRESSED THROUGH STORIES

Behavioral Scenarios draw on the power of an age-old human tradition: story-telling. Short narratives, typically 1 - 2 paragraphs long, capture what Brookfield (1987, p. 96)⁵ calls “critical incidents” or specific “events” that have occurred in the life of a team. The telling of such incidents means that instead of “abstract concepts,” participants “concentrate on describing particular happenings” (p. 97). These are anecdotes or stories about events in the life of the team, often told by several team members with varying nuances. They capture underlying key issues, or the historical baggage that may be blocking the team’s effectiveness and ability to work together effectively. Defensiveness from team members may be challenged by explaining that the stories are designed to represent no more than “a” version of the truth, as opposed to “the” version presented by consultants in typical data feedback sessions. Instead of devoting energy to discussing whether something happened in a certain way, the team is encouraged to accept the Behavioral Scenario as a work of “faction” (fact and fiction) and to go below the surface to gain a greater understanding of why the situation may have occurred.

Presented as snapshots of the life of the team, Behavioral Scenarios contain selected anecdotes from the pre-meeting interviews and focus groups. Actual behaviors, statements and attitudes related by team

TEAM BUILDING USING BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS

members are included, without referring to specific individuals. The most important elements to include are representative actions, words, behaviors and judgments from the team members' descriptions of the incidents. Assumptions and predispositions that led to a type of behavior are usually left implicit, but there should be a sufficiently detailed description for team members to surface the assumptions through discussion. Figure 2 shows the key elements of a Behavioral Scenario.

Figure 2 - Behavioral Scenario Elements

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ One or two paragraphs✓ "Story" format✓ Captures "real" behavioral anecdotes✓ Embeds assumptions, beliefs, judgments |
|--|

To understand more explicitly how Behavioral Scenarios can be used, we will return to the case study referred to above. The consultants reviewed the scenarios initially with the management team and then with the whole group. The goal was to improve relationships and performance.

BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS IN ACTION

In the focus groups and the three levels of managers' interviews a common theme was that people withheld important information from each other. This led to lack of cooperation and the forming of cliques. Specifically, one individual was cited as allegedly gaining and using to her own advantage inside knowledge such as salary information that she had learned from the management team.

⁵ Brookfield, S.D., 1987, *Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.

TEAM BUILDING USING BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS

Once the interviews and focus groups were completed we summarized the data and organized it into themes, including those that arose from the focus group sessions. We tried to focus on a half-dozen telling anecdotes that impacted the team's ability to work together and perform effectively. Another criterion used for choosing anecdotes was that they would work well with learning activities prepared in advance to help the team address specific barriers to its effectiveness. Each incident was captured in a one-paragraph story format.

Prior to the session an agenda was prepared and agreed with the manager. We met with the team at a staff meeting to describe the format of the coming session(s) and solicit their hopes and concerns. This could have been done at the start of the first team building session. In the case study, we chose to hold a pre-meeting in order to address a team concern about managers receiving briefings before the full team got together. The managers took the opportunity to discuss their needs as non-participants in the focus groups, and asserted their roles as leaders.

THE TEAM BUILDING MEETINGS

After agreeing on ground rules and describing the day, the first step with the management team was to review the Ladder Of Inference (Argyris, 1993)⁶. An adapted version of this model, shown in Figure 3, illustrates the relationship between observable "data" (as a video camera or tape recorder would record a scene), the data that is selected by a participant-observer, the underlying assumptions and beliefs which cause people to filter the observable "data", and the judgments they rationally and intuitively make about why they

⁶ Argyris, C. (1993), *Knowledge for Action*, Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.

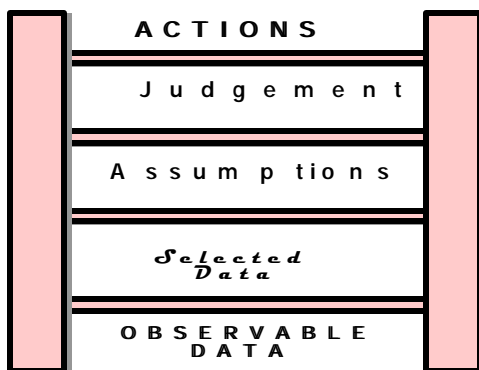
TEAM BUILDING USING BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS

and others behaved the way they did. Meyers⁷ (1986) writes that “[p]ersonal beliefs and values serve as a perceptual grid through which experience is screened”. Judgments are reached through the filters of personal motivations, beliefs and values. Based on the judgment made, actions – words and deeds – will take place in response.

We introduced the scenarios briefly by stating that they reflect selected incidents which team members related in the interviews, plus people’s assumptions and judgments about those incidents. True to the conceptual model, we explained the criteria, the values, beliefs and assumptions, by which we had filtered and selected the Behavioral Scenarios that were presented. Our criteria were that the incidents must be those that generated most emotion and consensus while being pertinent to team performance and working relationships.

After answering questions and illustrating the Ladder of Inference with examples that bring it to life, team members were asked to read the Behavioral Scenarios and select one that was less controversial in order to learn how to use this approach to critical thinking. Unsurprisingly, there were reactions of annoyance and defense as the critical incidents were read and the perspectives described in them were, at first glance, found to fit an “anti-management stance”.

Figure 3 – Ladder of Inference⁴



⁷ Meyers, C. (1986), *Teaching Students to Think Critically*, Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.

TEAM BUILDING USING BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS

Working with one Behavioral Scenario at a time the team members wrote down, individually or in pairs, what they believed to be the overt and underlying assumptions and judgments contained in the Scenario. Then the group brainstormed a list of assumptions and judgments underlying the actions and words in the critical incident. On occasion, the consultants suggested alternative assumptions or judgments to help the team reframe the issues and question an existing “mental model”, or “imitations of reality”, as Johnson-Laird⁸ (1983, p. 10) describes it. He explains that “human beings understand the world by constructing working models of it in their minds. Since these models are incomplete, they are simpler than the entities they represent.” The facilitator helps to bring the mental model closer to reality by asking questions that help the group test their assumptions. S/he then invites them to develop a shared understanding by examining realistic alternatives. Beach⁹ (1997) writes that “[s]hared understanding is never perfect” because “nobody knows all that there is to be known about an issue, and different people know different things about it” leading them “to frame things differently, meaning that they are all starting from different assumptions and are trying to tackle different problems.”

Behavioral Scenarios serve to:

- ◆ uncover differences in perspective about what happened, developing a more common understanding,
- ◆ get out into the open differing interpretations of what happened, pointing out how different backgrounds and experiences formed the interpretations,
- ◆ explore people’s rationale for their own and others’ actions, which is often different than what was assumed,
- ◆ model how they can air and work through formerly undiscussable issues, and

⁸ Johnson-Laird, P. N. (1983), *Mental Models*, Harvard Press: Cambridge, MA.

⁹ Beach, L.R. (1997), *The Psychology of Decision-Making: People in Organizations*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

TEAM BUILDING USING BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS

- ◆ enhance skills in listening, feedback and checking questionable intentions.

The outcome, in this case, was a facilitated discussion in which participants began to surface their thoughts and opinions about others' beliefs and intentions. The ultimate stated aim was to enable team members to learn how to check out and test the assumptions and judgments that are normal to make, in a way that creates common understanding and shared meaning.

As the session progressed, new, real-time data is generated directly from the management team about the context in which they operated and its impact on how they worked and interacted. These data were used to highlight and reinforce issues identified in the interviews and brought out in the Behavioral Scenarios. We have found this to be an especially useful way to address the “unspeakable” issues present on the team. It can be particularly helpful if used with a questionnaire or discussion that stimulates reflection on the team building experience, such as through open-ended questions about the team's process of working together during the meeting itself. Follow-up questions have included:

- ◆ What shocked or surprised you during the meeting?
- ◆ What, if anything, do you intend to do differently in future?”
- ◆ What are your expectations of others arising from the session?

The ah-ha of the management meeting occurred as the leaders were expressing disgust and annoyance at the blame that was being placed on them in one scenario for reducing headcount and reallocating work. The additional work that individuals gained through this change was described in the behavioral event scenario as having been put into effect without involving those who were impacted. Additionally, the change was described as having been made without increasing the rewards, or recognizing the higher performance and added stress that these decisions had caused. As the group read the scenario, the facilitator let them vent and then asked “If you were a team member, and not a manager, what aspects of what is said in this scenario

TEAM BUILDING USING BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS

would you consider to be valid?" Interestingly, the team agreed that all the perspectives were valid if the situation was viewed from the perspective of a team member rather than a manager. Having accepted the team's perspective, the leaders were no longer defensive. Instead, they proceeded to question the decisions that they had made, why they had made them, and how they had communicated them. The shift from defensiveness to fact-finding also led to them to express empathy with the wider team. Finally, there were some collective but personal recriminations on how they had handled the changes in workload. The facilitator supported their changing viewpoint that helped them to question their assumptions and ensuing judgments with questions such as:

- ◆ To what extent can you find a rational case to support the team members' perspectives?
- ◆ What evidence do you have to suggest that they have a valid grievance?
- ◆ How far do you think this is just management bashing and how far is it a genuine concern on their behalf for pressure of work?
- ◆ What would you do differently if you had to do this again?
- ◆ What would you like them to have done differently?
- ◆ What implications does that have for your behaviors as leaders?

A week later we held the full group session. The management team kicked this off by describing the revelations they had had in the previous management session. Managers apologized for inadequate communications in the past and gave credence to the validity of the team members' perspectives. This got the session off to a positive start. The same Behavioral Scenarios were discussed as those that had been used at management meeting. This time the managers took more of a facilitative role. The type of complaining that had been seen in past meetings did not occur in this session. Indeed, team members acknowledged that everyone, including the managers, were working harder and dealing with similar problems. Some practical

TEAM BUILDING USING BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS

solutions were found to resolve specific issues of overload, including the decision to pay for taxis home for those working a pre-sanctioned ten hour day or longer.

On the issue of the individual who had inside knowledge, one consultant met with her the day before the team meeting. She was told the content of the feedback and invited to give her point of view. She was surprised at the depth of criticism of her behavior. At the facilitator's request, she avoided making defensive allegations in favor of describing the facts as she recalled them. Her perspective illuminated a number of contextual circumstances that contributed to her acting as she had. For example, she had only divulged confidential information when asked probing questions by her colleagues. Her boss had called her in for meetings and had closed the door. However, the other team members perceived that she had voluntarily approached the boss to talk about them, and this was why she had closed the door. Without substantive information, it seemed, speculation had arisen among the rest of the team that she was gossiping about her colleagues. She was asked to agree to state these perspectives through a psychodramatic intervention in the team building meeting. She agreed. Through a tough, accusatory interview with a facilitator in front of the team, her position was stated and the team asked if it could be validated. They agreed that she did raise some good points and in the words of one team member: *"I'm not sure that I like the way that all this has come out but I do know that it needed to be said and needed to be dealt with so that this team could have the chance of moving on."*

There were tears and open expression of feelings that showed bonding, sense making and some fear that so much had been raised that it might be difficult to rebuild relationships. Most team members expressed relief that the lid had been taken off the pressure cooker and that there was a growth of understanding without the customary blame.

TEAM BUILDING USING BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS

The session continued in a lighter vein with games, task improvement activities and a group dinner. The next day team members each stood in front of the team and solicited feedback from each team member, with the ground rule that there was to be no defensiveness, just questioning to improve understanding. This session was also powerful, inciting direct openness and emotional response. Overall, the feedback on the session was positive and members felt that a long bridge had been crossed, enabling them to overcome the barriers of the past.

LESSONS LEARNED

Here are some of the lessons that we have learned in using Behavioral Scenarios as a teambuilding technique.

Competence

Behavioral Scenarios are not for the faint-hearted facilitator. It is important that facilitators have the skills, experience and confidence needed to help groups surface and work through sensitive interpersonal issues.

Open-mindedness

If done well, scenarios can elevate the open-mindedness of team members and facilitators alike. The methodology implies a ground rule that everyone work to suspend judgment in order to inquire into each other's assumptions, beliefs and judgments.

Previews

It can be helpful to conduct a pre-scenario session to help a team self-identify, as a group, the particular issues they want to address. Whether or not to do this depends on the issues uncovered in the interviews and focus groups, and the team's maturity and willingness to engage in team building.

Sequencing

TEAM BUILDING USING BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS

It helps to warm up the group by selecting a scenario that you think will be less threatening and less controversial.

Rewriting

There is no panacea for reducing defensiveness. However, the consultant must avoid modeling the very defensive behaviors that participants are being encouraged to overcome. One way, in response to criticism of a scenario, is to involve the group in re-writing it to capture the incident more accurately. However, this is less likely to occur if the facilitator has done a good job of representing what was said during the research.

OTHER APPLICATIONS

Behavioral Scenarios are especially good for helping teams improve their effectiveness. The approach can also be used in other contexts to uncover and address potentially sensitive information. These are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 – Other Uses For Scenarios

- ✓ To address sensitive interpersonal issues between individuals
- ✓ To improve interpersonal skills, e.g. training in face-to-face communication
- ✓ To resolve employee relations issues, e.g. manager-subordinate conflict
- ✓ To enable inter-group work effectiveness
- ✓ To integrate cultures between different or merged organizations

IN SUMMARY

Encouraging individuals and teams to reveal, openly accept and work through sensitive or difficult issues can be one of the toughest, riskiest elements of a team facilitator's role. Fear and vulnerability of being

TEAM BUILDING USING BEHAVIORAL SCENARIOS

“shot as the messenger” of bad news happens all too often and may cause the consultant to be passive in telling the truth.

In response to the need for a technique that assists in making the truth palatable, Behavioral Scenarios are stories which capture critical incidents representing difficult interpersonal issues, and the assumptions and judgments that form them. Critical incidents are a long-established research and personal development tool. Using them in team situations creates a groundbreaking new opportunity for teams. The approach can be used as a means of capturing, reporting back and creating understanding of sensitive data to enable teams to improve their effectiveness and ability to work together. In so doing the ironies of corrosion of character stemming from hierarchical abuse of power, manipulative leadership and non-accountability cited by Sennett (Ibid.) can be allayed in favor of renewed trust, collaboration and intrinsic satisfaction.