From time to time I see or hear something that I think is worth sharing. This blog serves this purpose. It is an ongoing work in progress that I will add to from time to time.

My hope is that what interests and shapes me personally and professionally may be of interest to others. If something I share resonates for you, I welcome your contributions and feedback.

29 March 2018

Let’s talk about feelings: A relational leadership response to emotion

“Let’s talk about feelings”. Sadly (pun intended), this is not an invitation commonly issued in business or organisational contexts. Yet, emotions feature in all relationships to a greater or lesser extent. These inevitable human responses tend to present significant challenges for people in organisational relationships, particularly leaders who have a responsibility to manage issues that arise.

A clue as to why, emotions can be challenging can be found in the ways emotions are viewed. If viewed as belonging in the private domain of individuals and governed by clearly defined, cultural prescriptions that dictate ways, times and places they can be expressed, it makes sense that emotional responses that do not fit with the ‘norm’, will be viewed as problematic. Responses such as, “You are over reacting” or “too emotional” or “irrational” or “making a mountain out of a molehill” tend to reflect this approach. The person and emotion are often seen as a problem. This private individualistic view invites a more private response. In these situations, emotions, and those expressing them, can be ignored, negatively judged, minimised or shut down.

Emotions that are not addressed effectively can present challenges for organisations. Discontent that is not appropriately acknowledged and addressed can be exacerbated and seriously undermine organisational success. So too, can expressions of enthusiasm and commitment. Furthermore, leaders often lack skills to effectively manage situations that involve emotion, particularly when expressed strongly and when they subscribe to this view of emotions as problematic.
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There are other perspectives about emotions on offer. One alternative approach views emotions as inevitable expressions of experience that present, to varying degrees for varying reasons, in relationships. This relational approach views emotions as “always expressed in relation to someone or something” (Hornstrup et al., 2012, p.52) and understandable and valid. Different people respond differently depending on morality, values, experience and a range of other cultural and contextual factors. A range of emotional responses are considered acceptable because the multiple factors involved generate multiple emotional expressions. Emotions are a form of communication, created in cultural and social contexts and conveyed in response to these contexts (Hornstrup et al., 2012). The idea of emotions as communicating a range of social and contextual values and experiences, invites more of a relational response. A relational response involves using appreciative curiosity to generate the meaning and significance of the situation that the emotional response relates to.

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I prefer to think of emotional expression as a reflection of passion, commitment and importance placed on the situation by those expressing the emotion. I have found that people who express significant emotion tend to care a great deal. It may well be preferable to value these people in your organisation than see them as a problem. Of course, there may well be varying degrees of emotion that presents in less obvious ways that may not indicate less care, passion or importance.

Whatever the situation, the leadership task is to invite safe, respectful, appreciative conversation that creates space to generate meaningful understanding and consider possible further steps. These steps may involve no further action beyond acknowledgment and validation of the emotion. Or, they may require referral to relevant personal or professional support. Some kind of organisational change or development may be necessary. It is important to appreciate and respect that people may not wish to engage in such a conversation at a particular time or space, particularly if they also subscribe to the idea that the emotional expression is problematic. There may also be embarrassment or shame to deal with. Whatever the situation, leave the door open for further discussion and support.

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There are a range of possible options to consider depending on the situation and a collaborative relational approach can determine these. According to Hornstrup and colleagues (2012), emotions are a way of communicating and connecting and an expression of morals, ethics and values that are worthy of understanding and appreciating.
If you want to know more about relational leadership or ways to address emotions effectively in your workplace, Adventurous Conversations Ltd has a range of services designed to help. Contact us for an appointment. We offer a complimentary, introductory, half hour session to discuss how we might work together. Visit our website. Download a brochure. You can phone, email or book online. The following book will provide further reading.

Reference