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What Are the Experiences Of Team Leaders Whose Manager Adopts a Dialogic I-Thou Attitude In Relating With Them?

Abstract

The research project explored the potential for applying the dialogic I-Thou (Buber 1958b and 1965) approach to relating between persons in organisations. It specifically explored the experiences of eight team leaders, in a call centre, whose manager had trained in self awareness and the theory and practice of the dialogic way of relating.

The research provided a valuable insight into how the nature of the employer-employee relationship influences employee self image and how self image influences employee choices about performance. The research further suggests that the dialogic offers considerable potential as a strategy for promoting a culture of humanity in organisations. This article presents a case for applying a dialogical attitude to employer- employee relationships as an approach to team development and for its use both as a model of leadership and as an integral part of leadership development.

Key words

dialogic, relationship, organisations, leadership, teams, performance

Research Origins

The energy for conducting research into dialogic I-Thou relating originated during my study for an MA in Gestalt Psychotherapy when I was introduced to the writings of Martin Buber and their application in the clinical setting. It was for me a truly 'aha moment' when I saw it's potential for organisations as a model for developing the

relationship skills of managers, for leadership development and for informing interventions aimed at facilitating individuals, teams and organisations to grow and develop.

I agree with Clarkson (1997) who writes that relationship is the 'first condition of being human'. Human beings are motivated by the need to establish and maintain relationships (Cashdan 1988). A person's greatest satisfaction is being connected through entering into relationship. The greatest pain is non relatedness and the threat of losing an important relationship with another human being (Nagy 1956 as quoted in (Friedman 1976). Relationship is the 'essence of life' and is 'key to our existence as human beings' (Trautmann and Erskine 1999). Everything that exists does so in webs of relating (Yontef 1988). Who we are and what we do occurs only, and exists always, within a rich matrix of relationship (Trautman and Erskine 1999). Organisations are 'systems of interdependent human beings' in which task is delivered through a pattern of interconnected and hierarchical relationships (Walsh 1999).

Literature Search

I immersed myself in the 'significant body of psychotherapeutic literature' (Hycner 1993) on the dialogic approach to relating as the primary source for my literature search. The approach to dialogical psychotherapy is based on Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue (1958b, 1965) that has been developed into a therapeutic approach by writers such as Hycner (1985,1987, 1993); Friedman (1975, 1976b, 1985a); Trub (1964b); Heard (1993); Jacobs (1989, 1995); and Yontef (1993, 1999).

The dialogical approach to relating originated with Martin Buber (1958b, 1965) and from the relational, or dialogical approach, that is described by Hycner (1985) as the 'ultimate basis of our existence' (1985 : 29). It is an approach of 'being open to the otherness' (Hycner 1993 :

42) of the client where the therapist is willing to submit to the between in being open to the possibility of 'genuine meeting' (Hycner 1993). It is this human attitude that self and 'the other is worthy of respect' (Yontef 1993) : 40) that influences the process and therefore goal of dialogical psychotherapy. It is an approach that Hycner describes as reflecting the 'personal orientation', the 'certain approach, attitude or stance' of the therapist towards the client' (1993 : 42).

I describe the dialogic as three interrelated levels of a process. The first level is the 'swinging back and forth' and the 'rhythmic alternation' (Hycner 1985) between the I- Thou and the I- It which

Friedman (1985a) describes as being the 'two fold world of relation'. The Thou of I-Thou is addressed as 'you' and as 'a person' who is entitled to respect whereas the It of the I-It relation is treated as 'a means to end' and as 'an object to be manipulated' (Evans 1996). The second level of process is the interaction of the 'interhuman elements' of presence; genuine and unreserved communication; and inclusion (including confirmation) which occur within the swinging back and forth between the I-Thou and I-It. The therapist practices presence and inclusion. Genuine and unreserved communication is the verbal manifestation of his presence. The client responds to the therapist through his own presence and feels confirmed in doing so. The third level of process is described as the between by Friedman (1990), Hycner (1985, 1990, 1993), Hycner and Jacobs (1995), Jacobs (1985) and Yontef (1988, 1993) since it has the potential to emerge from the interaction between the client and the therapist. It is the place where the experience of genuine meeting, between one unique human being and another, occurs.

A search of the literature on the Gestalt approach in organisations yielded little or no sources on the relationship between manager-employee. Herman and Korenich (1977) focus on 'authentic management' as an approach to understanding 'human behaviour' in organisations. Nevis (1987) explores Gestalt as an approach to organisational consulting and the one chapter on relationship focuses on the relationship between consultant and client. The focus in Merry and Brown (1987) and Critchley and Casey (1989) is on approaches to helping organisations overcome the stuckness of their emotional blocks. Clarkson and Shaw (1992) and Clarkson (1990, 1994, 1997) have touched on the I-You relationship as one of a typology of five relationships to be found in organisations but they do not specifically explore the dialogic approach. There is a focus on relationship from the perspective of field theory which is acknowledged to be an influence on Gestalt psychotherapy by Parlett (1991, 1993, 1997). The relationship between the organisation and its environment is explored in these sources in terms of either systems thinking by Morgan (1986); Burke (1987); Beckhard and Harris (1987) and Senge (1990) or socio- technical systems by Etzioni (1964) and Schein (1986).

A brief review of the literature, other than Gestalt, on how relationship is treated in the literature on organisations shows that, with relatively few exceptions, the focus for developing the manager-employee relationship is on what the manager 'does to' the employee. This seems to me to be the primary focus of style theories described in Kakabadse, Ludlow and Vinnicombe (1987); the trait or competency theories Handy (1993); Bennis and Nanus (1985), Tichy and Devanna (1990);

and contingency theories of Hersey and Blanchard (1988); or theorists of specific behaviours such as Peters and Waterman (1982); Peters and Austin (1985); Waterman (1992); Schein (1992) and (Pugh (1987). These sources point to a hierarchical relationship and an underlying attitude of the employee being the passive recipient of what the manager does as, for example, is demonstrated in the language of 'leaders and followers' in Peters and Waterman (1982) and Bennis and Nanus (1985).

Research Approach

Methodology

I wanted to explore employee experiences of relating with a manager for whom I developed a programme and subsequently trained in the interhuman elements of the dialogic approach.

I approached the Customer Service Director who was responsible for call centres in a major utility for the purely pragmatic reason that I had previously worked in the organisation as a consultant, had established a credible reputation, and believed that the Customer Services Director would respond positively to my request for support. He gave me the opportunity to work with the Customer Service Manager of one of the call centres. In choosing her, he in effect chose her eight team leaders as the participants for the research, subject to their consent.

I developed a programme for training the manager in the zones of self awareness (Yontef 1993) and the 'elements of the interhuman' (Buber 1965b) of the dialogic approach. I held one half day training session each week over a period of eight weeks. The manager engaged with the dialogic as her approach to relating over the next twelve weeks which I describe as the 'research period'.

I intended to use the phenomenological descriptions of the team leaders - their individual and unique experiences - as the data for my research. I wanted to conduct the research in the natural setting of the Customer Service Call Centre where they and their manager - the Customer Service Call Centre Manager - were employed. The purpose of my research and, in particular, my intention to 'explore the experiences' of the team leaders, is consistent with the epistemology and ontology of the post positivist research paradigm, with qualitative rather than quantitative research, and with a phenomenological research methodology.

I used phenomenology as the methodology for this research because it supports personal experience as a legitimate source of research data. Human beings are able to attach meaning

and purpose to the events and phenomena that surround them. I recognised that a phenomenological approach is consistent with Gestalt psychotherapy and its philosophical roots in existential phenomenology and requires the same characteristics in the researcher as the Gestalt psychotherapist (Brown 1997). The process of epoche, or 'suspending preconceptions and putting them in brackets' (Yontef 1999: 16), is the core of the phenomenological method in Gestalt psychotherapy just as it is in qualitative research.

I conducted a unstructured rather, than structured interview (Denzin and Lincoln 1998), with each team leader, soon after the end of the research period, as I wanted to be open to the 'rich possibilities' that might emerge from the research participants. I wanted to capture their experiences without imposing any 'a priori' categorisation on them that might have limited either the field of enquiry or their ability to choose whatever words they wanted to make sense of their experiences. I tape recorded each interview with the written permission of each interviewee. I then developed a very simple process for data analysis and reduction that incorporated the principles of epoche, description and equalisation, described by Spinelli (1989) as the 'principles underlying the phenomenological method'.

Validity

I agree with Cresswell (1998) who advocates use of the term 'verification' (1998) rather than validity since this word rightly underscores qualitative research as a 'distinct approach' and a 'legitimate mode of inquiry in its own right' (1998 : 201). Verification is about being aware of the risks of the 'human element' in the researcher but for me it was also about introducing rigour into the methods that I used.

Research Findings

The team leaders described their experiences, after the research period, in terms of relating with a friend rather than with a manager

Friend was a term used to describe experiences of relating that occurred, in the moment, and only in the working environment.

A friend was somebody whose focus was on the human and who showed the 'right attitude to people'. A 'friend' was described as somebody who 'knows you' and 'makes the effort to get to know what's going on for you' both 'in the working environment' and your 'life outside of work'. She was somebody with whom you can 'talk about anything' and where there can be a 'two way

conversation'. A friend can 'be trusted to 'tell it as it is'. She is somebody who 'shows care and concern' and will not 'do anybody any harm'. She is a person with whom you could 'express any worries and concerns' and who 'sees, knows and accepts you' as the 'unique individual' you are.

The team leaders descriptions suggested two levels of experience because, while psychologically experiencing her as a friend, the team leaders never lost sight of the reality of knowing that she was their manager. A manager was somebody who was experienced as having a more of a focus on task than person whereas a friend was somebody whose focus, in the moment, was more on the person.

The manager, experienced as friend, provides evidence of the underlying influence of the interhuman element of presence

The manager showed her 'real person' rather than the person acting out the 'role of manager'. The team leaders described how she 'took off the mask' of manager by being who she was as a person rather than who she was expected to be. For example, she shared her lack of confidence in her ability to perform a particular task that she had never carried out before. She showed the courage, in this instance, to really 'open herself' to another 'human being'. She was willing to be vulnerable in risking what other people might say or think about her. She was willing to accept help from her team leaders.

She showed her presence through her willingness to 'talk openly about anything'. She no longer attempted to 'control every conversation'. She was willing to 'surrender herself' to whatever might be raised. She was willing to be open to the experience of what might emerge from the conversation. She was willing to re-shape her 'previously held views' and engage in 'different trains of thought'. She was willing to allow herself to be impacted by the team leaders and what they had to say. Such behaviours really struck the team leaders because they were not what they had come to expect of their manager.

The team leaders responded by being more willing to talk openly. Their communication became unreserved in terms of 'no holding back'. They raised problems that they would previously have ignored by, for example, avoiding 'telling her there was a problem'. Communication was described as 'genuine'. The team leaders were more willing to say things without 'wondering if they ought to do so' for fear of her reaction. They could talk openly about problems to do with the task. They could talk about personal problems that could potentially affect them at work. They could talk about who they were in terms of

'sharing something about themselves' and about 'how they were'. They could tell her if they were 'not happy with something'. They did not have to 'deny their feelings' and experience the discomfort of 'bottling things up until they could contain them no longer'. They could not only say what they were thinking but what they were feeling. Expressing feelings was described as important by both the male and female team leaders.

The team leaders experiences of being treated as human beings, rather than as a number on the payroll, provide evidence of the managers practice of inclusion

The team leaders described how the manager 'treated them as individuals'. She 'took the time to see and know the real person'. She 'showed an interest in them'. She got to 'know something' about their personal life'. She seemed to 'build pictures of them'. She 'acknowledged them'. She got to 'understand them as characters'. She showed genuine care and concern for them and for their feelings. She made time available for them and, since they knew that her time was valuable, they felt as if they were valued. They each felt seen as a 'unique individual'. They felt as if they were 'genuinely listened to'. They felt recognised for who they were rather than only for what they did. She was 'responding to them' and their needs in the moment. The team leaders felt 'recognised' by her behaviour which for me, in the language of the interhuman, is feeling confirmed. One team leader described how 'You can't be a good manager without the personal side of it, the human side. Otherwise, you are just 'responding to one time' - the task!

In particular, the team leaders were struck by her use of awareness. She shared her thoughts and feelings in the moment. They described how such behaviour 'helped them to say the difficult thing' and, in effect, gave them permission to do so. She said things that they might not have taken the risk of saying for themselves. Her words often expressed what they 'could not find the words to say'.

The team leaders experiences of relating created a 'safe space' where mutual trust could develop between them

The team leaders experienced feeling 'safe' in relating with the manager. They felt as if they were on the 'same level' and as if she was 'one of us'. They experienced mutuality in relating with her.

They were no longer worried about how the manager might respond. They no longer feared any misuse of her power and authority. They no

longer feared the possibility of personal attack or punishment. They were no longer afraid of being shamed. They could be authentic in saying whatever they wanted to say to her rather than having to selectively choose what they said. They could even disagree with her and described disagreeing as being a rare experience for them. I believe that their experience of a safe place corresponds to what Buber (1965) describes as 'the between'.

A level of trust progressively developed that had not existed before. The manager was trusted her team leaders to get the job done in their own way. She focused more on the targets and left them to determine how they were to be achieved. The team leaders responded by showing trust in the manager. They trusted how she would respond. They trusted 'what she would say' and how she would say it. They trusted that she would 'be there' for them. They trusted that she would 'make time available' for them. It came across in the team leaders descriptions of their experiences how it was really important, to them personally and to their performance, for them to know that 'her words could be trusted'.

The manager's human approach provided the support that the team leaders needed to take responsibility for the task

The support provided by the manager, before the research period, was experienced as support for the task. It was predominantly support for the performance targets and their achievement. Her behaviour was actually not experienced as support. It was, for example, experienced as 'usually being on the negative' and having a focus on the correction of what had 'gone wrong'. Any problem was often experienced as a criticism of the team leaders and they often ending up feeling that 'they were to blame'. Her negative support eroded their self confidence and their belief in their ability to do the job.

The manager, experienced as a friend, supported the person. The focus was much more on 'we', the manager working with her team leaders, versus 'me' where the manager told them what to do and, in doing so, usually ignored their views. A problem became something to share and an opportunity for working together. There was more talking about a problem than the manager insisting on her particular solution. The focus was more on the positive than the negative. The manager supported the task but only if requested to do so. She was 'there and available' and 'willing to help' if her guidance and advice were needed. Her support built their self esteem and confidence in their 'ability to do the job'. The result was that they took responsibility for the task to an extent

that they would not have done before. She supported them and they supported the task.

Discussion

The dialogic offers an approach to leadership and its development

I believe that the dialogic offers an approach for understanding leadership as an influencing process that occurs at all levels of an organisation.

I make the distinction between leadership, used here as to describe a **process** of influencing, and leadership as a generic term used to describe a role that is usually carried out by somebody at the top of the organisational hierarchy. It is quite distinct from the generic role of management that is usually carried out lower down the hierarchy. Leaders are responsible for strategic direction whereas managers are responsible for controlling the primary activity for which the organisation is in business. Leaders and managers both have to influence people - either to 'buy in' to the strategic direction (leader) or to achieve the required performance targets (manager) - because they both get results through people. For this reason, I argue that the influencing process of leadership occurs at all levels within an organisation.

The evidence from this research is that the influencing process, in the language of the dialogic, is an interhuman experience that occurs, in the moment, between an employee and a person in the organisational role of either leader or manager. This research has specifically studied the experiences of team leaders and the manager to whom they reported. Any experiences of relating, any interactions, will be different from one moment to another. The process should therefore more accurately be described in terms of the verb of 'relating' rather than as the noun of 'relationship'. Relating is something that happens rather than exists. A core competence of leadership as process is therefore to be open to the experience of what is happening, in the moment, between self and other.

Influencing is a psychological process in which the leader is perceived as a 'significant other'. The team leaders frequently described experiencing the manager as parent or teacher. The evidence from this research is that the influence of the immediate manager is either positive or negative but rarely neutral. The manager had a significant potential for influence because of her position in being the primary source for the satisfaction of the human needs of the team leaders. Such needs, psychological or otherwise, appear likely to emerge in the early moments of contact. It is the support provided, in such moments, through the

practice of presence and inclusion, which enables an effective leader to pick up on such needs through the practice of awareness. This research indicates four key supporting behaviours - support through words by talking both openly and authentically ; support through behaviours such as being there and readily available ; support through the manager's presence - being who she is rather than behaving as is expected from the role; and support through showing an underlying attitude of the human.

The manager can create the potential for influence to occur but cannot control the outcome of process. Influence, in dialogic terms, is a two way process that requires the practice of the interhuman elements by the leader and a chosen response from the employee. The practice, in dialogic terms, will be characterised primarily by a willingness to enter into open and authentic communication. The evidence from this research is that there is a momentary meeting, possibly I- Thou, in the between where the employee can experience some level of satisfaction of their psychological needs as a human being. For example, they might experience being seen for who they are rather than what they can contribute to the task. I believe that the experience of need satisfaction is the primary influence on the employee making positive choices about performance. It contributes to the feeling of being safe and to the development of trust.

This is not to deny the existence of I-It. This attitude, as Buber (1965) writes himself, is part of life and, in my experience is certainly characteristic of organisational life. I-It might actually be the appropriate attitude if there is a crisis but problems are likely to occur if I-It is the only attitude experienced by employees.

The dialogic approach perceives employees as active participants in the influencing process - with the freedom to choose their response!

A process approach to leadership, based on the dialogic, is consistent with other approaches to leadership as an influencing process. The dialogic is different in how the influence occurs. For example, some approaches focus on the personality characteristics of the leader, on the leadership style and others on situational factors as the focus for influence.

The consistent factor in such approaches is the underlying assumption that leader has the power to exercise influence over the employee. Influence is perceived as entirely dependent on the actions of the leader. The employee is, in effect, a passive participant who responds to the actions of the manager. The employee as passive participant is reinforced by an approach to leadership

development that is based on developing the influencing skills of the manager that are then 'done to' the employee. Influence is a conditioning process in which the key issue for the leader is the choice of which skill or style will achieve the desired response from the employee.

The focus of the dialogic approach is on the manager creating the potential for a mutual experience of relating in which employee psychologically experiences the manager as a friend. The potential creates choice - about entering into human to human experience of relating with the manager or not - for the employee. The evidence from this research is that the employee is more likely to respond positively than negatively because a positive response offers the potential for satisfaction of their needs as a human being.

It is the immediate manager who exercises the primary influence over employees and their choices about performance

The team leaders descriptions provide evidence that positive choices about responding to a mutual, rather than hierarchical, experience of relating is likely to result in them making positive choices about performance. They internalised their experiences of mutual relating. The experiences made them feel good about themselves and gave them the confidence they needed to do the job. They were empowered by their experiences and took responsibility for achieving their targets to an extent that they had not done before the research period. They responded very positively to the human approach of the manager and wanted to perform for her. As one team leader described:

There is a right way of dealing with people. You feel like working for that person, doing the best for somebody who treats you that way. I feel I want to work for her. I want to do the job for her'

The key factor was the manager adopting the dialogic as her approach to relating with the team leaders about issues relating to the achievement of targets as well as when relating on a purely personal level. There was no distinction in her approach. This difference was key.

One team leader summed it up very eloquently when she described how 'the boxes have gone'. In other words, this team leader was no longer experiencing a separation of person from the task. She, and the other team leaders, experienced the human whatever the nature of the interaction with their manager. There was no longer a 'box' where the focus of any interaction was the task and another 'box', relatively much smaller because the manager gave it less time, for interacting with the

team leaders on a personal level. Her approach was different to what it was before the research period. There was now only one box - for taking a dialogic approach in all interactions irrespective of the purpose of the interaction.

Conclusion

This research is limited by its study of one manager and her team of eight team leaders but it offers a solid foundation for further research into the dialogic as a strategic approach for developing organisations.

The research clearly highlights the potential benefits of the dialogic as an approach for developing a culture of the 'human' in organisations. It would run the risk of being just another technique if it were to be used purely as an approach to leadership development. It needs to be part of a broader approach to organisational development which recognises the key role of managers as the primary influencers of culture change. Managers are much more likely to treat people as human beings, if they experience the human as part of their own development, than they are if the 'human' is something that is merely espoused from the top. Such rhetoric rarely if ever becomes reality. The dialogic is an approach that, I believe, really can reverse the current trend towards the dehumanisation of people in organisations.

I have further developed my leadership programme since completion of the research to reinforce the nature of the dialogic as a lived experience that is an integral part of the developing a culture of the human in organisations. The programme, and the process for cultural change, is a focus for my OD consultancy and for my further doctoral research into the dialogic approach as a strategy for change in organisations.

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