Facilitating Transformative Change

Changing identity from the inside out

Imagine the following scenario...

You enter an organisation. People are not talking to each other, the atmosphere is tense, there is a politeness that doesn't feel quite real.

There is a lot of talking going on in corridors. Gossip is very much a part of the organisational life, issues are personalised. There are differing points of view, camps and cliques forming around groups of people.

The leader is either isolated from it all or the subject of gossip, accused of siding with a particular group or person, or of favouritism.

The organisation's actual work is hardly spoken about. Conversations and time are spent on interpersonal issues, resolving conflict over sometimes petty issues. Small issues are blown out of proportion.

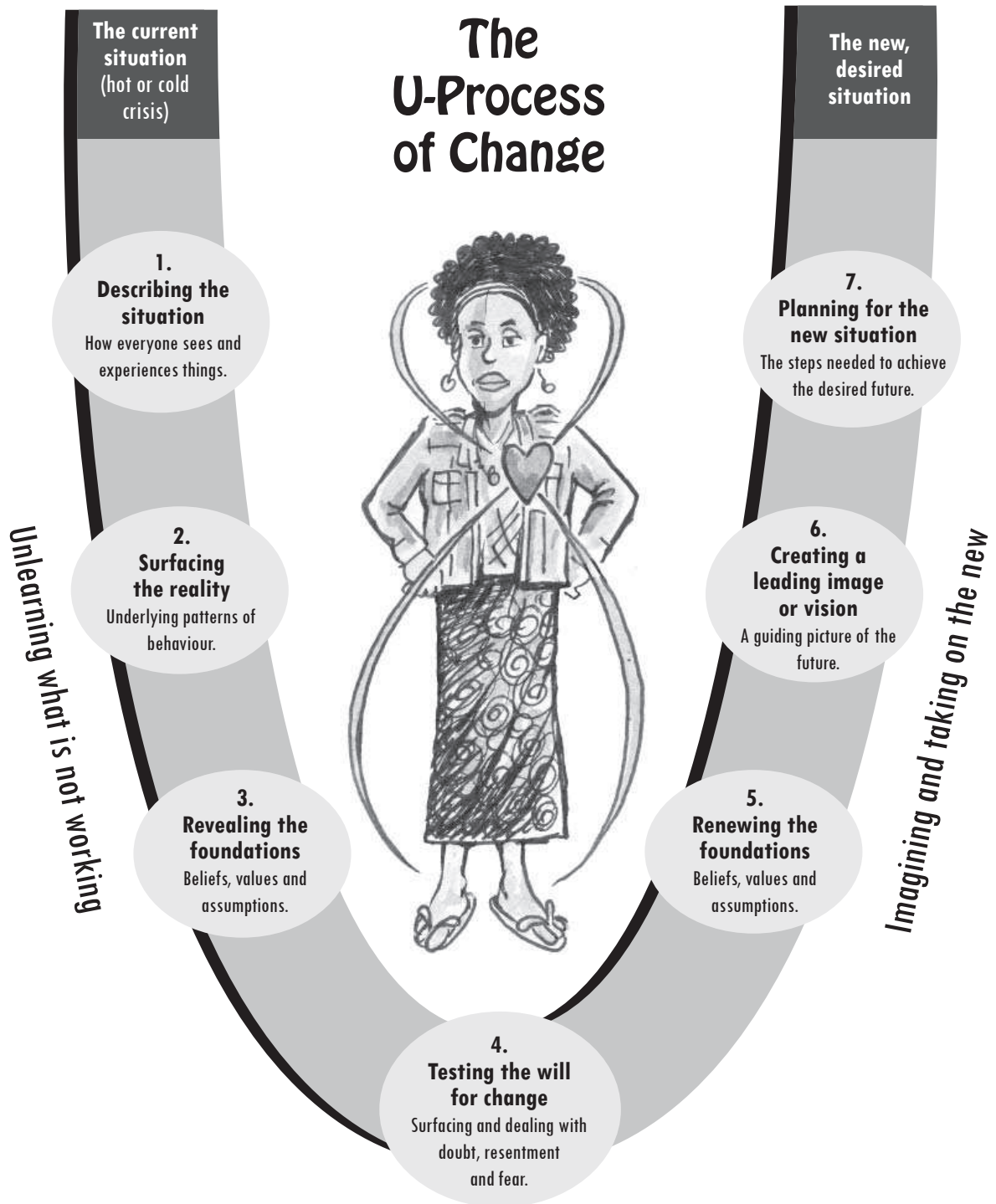There is underperformance and low energy and morale or people are overworked and run off their feet.

A sense of pride is lost, the work is no longer exciting, projects are failing and funding is drying up. There is no sense of direction or clarity about what the organisation is supposed to be doing and staff are not sure what is expected of them or who is doing what.

This is an organisation on the verge of transformative change or of collapse.

the U-Process as a core process of transformative change

The U-Process of Change

The current situation (hot or cold crisis)

The new, desired situation

Unlearning what is not working

Imagining and taking on the new

1. Describing the situation
How everyone sees and experiences things.

2. Surfacing the reality
Underlying patterns of behaviour.

3. Revealing the foundations
Beliefs, values and assumptions.

4. Testing the will for change
Surfacing and dealing with doubt, resentment and fear.

5. Renewing the foundations
Beliefs, values and assumptions.

6. Creating a leading image or vision
A guiding picture of the future.

7. Planning for the new situation
The steps needed to achieve the desired future.

The U-process was developed in 1970 by Glasl and Lemson - (see Glasl, F. *Confronting Conflict: A First-Aid Kit for Handling Conflict*, Stroud: Hawthorn Press, 1999). A different but related version of the U-process has been developed by Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers. *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*. Cambridge, MA, SoL, 2004. We still use the older and simpler version described here, but like the action learning cycle, the U-process is a change archetype that is as old as human development itself.

Transformative change processes are characterised by crisis. We cannot learn our way out of a crisis but rather have to *unlearn* our way through. What has to be unlearnt are the deeper attitudes, values, beliefs and assumptions that are the foundations of the crisis or stuckness, releasing the situation for new learning and *possibly* positive change. The example above illustrates some examples of unhealthy relationships, culture or leadership that would have to be let go of, to be unlearnt, before new life could take its place.

Transformative change approaches can be depicted as a *U-process of change*, as depicted in the diagram on page 112.

Working with transformative change can only begin once the crisis or stuckness is ready to be faced — where there is sufficient initial will or acceptance for change, in the people and their leaders, to consider dealing with the problem.

IN A NUTSHELL... A conscious approach using the U-process will begin with the need for the crisis or stuckness to be surfaced and to be commonly understood by all involved or implicated. The practice here is of **collectively** uncovering the crisis, agreeing on what really causes it, letting these go and then creating a new resolved future.

The Seven Tasks of Working through the U-process

THE FIRST TASK – describing the situation

The first task is to get everyone to describe the crisis situation, to share their experiences openly. What has been happening? Get people to tell stories of the crisis, giving real examples of how each person has observed and experienced it, revealing their feelings as facts. Detail is important. Getting a full description of all the facets of the situation is important to create a comprehensive initial picture.

Do not proceed until everyone is satisfied that their experience is acknowledged.
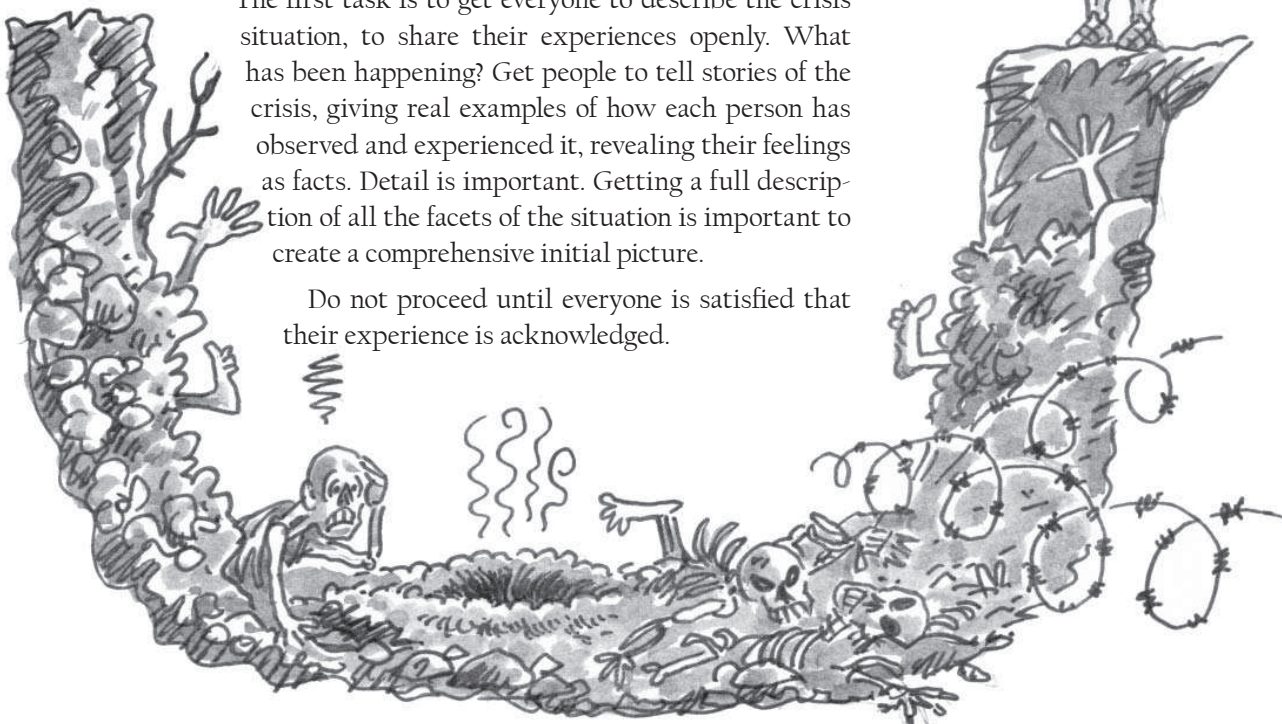
THE SECOND TASK – surfacing the underlying reality

The second task is to surface a collective picture of reality underlying the situation. Ask "What is *really* going on behind these experiences?" Look for patterns of behaviour, what habits have people got into. Develop pictures of the crisis. Ask people to develop pictures, images or metaphors that describe the crisis. This can be very revealing. (See page 102)

Do not proceed until there is consensus about the underlying picture.

## THE THIRD TASK – revealing the foundations

The third task is to reveal the foundations of the crisis. This is often referred to as the "attitudinal level". What are the underlying values, attitudes, beliefs and assumptions that explain people's behaviours? How do these create the patterns and habits described in the second task? This gets to the real foundations of the crisis.

This third task is always a tough discussion and requires people to acknowledge deep-seated views. Examples might be: "I have been overly competitive"; "I have not taken the women in this organisation seriously"; "We have not cared about people's personal lives"; "I have wanted to hold onto power because I don't believe others can do a good job"; "We are the best, we don't need to learn".

Through this process it becomes possible for people to let go of things that are not healthy or working, in effect by unlearning them. It is very empowering to be able to say: "I can see that holding onto these attitudes and values has caused the crisis we are in, and that it is no longer appropriate."

It is important to proceed with consensus. Remember that individual insights are not enough. What matters is that the group, as a whole, develops pictures and understandings that are true to them all, regardless of any blame or regret.

Of course some good values and attitudes will be revealed – not everything in the organisation is a problem or in crisis – and these should still be appreciated and valued. You don't want to throw the baby out with the bath water!
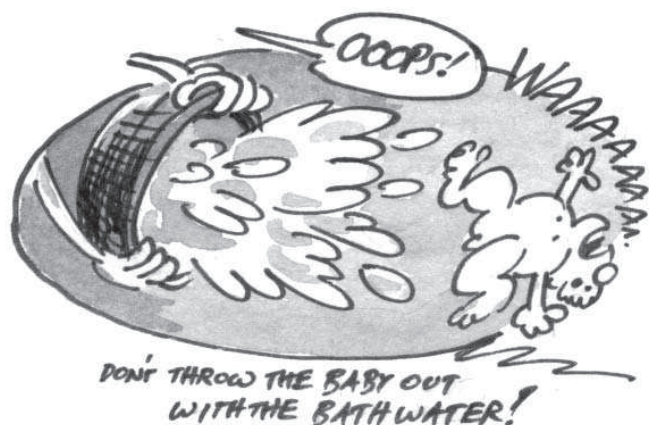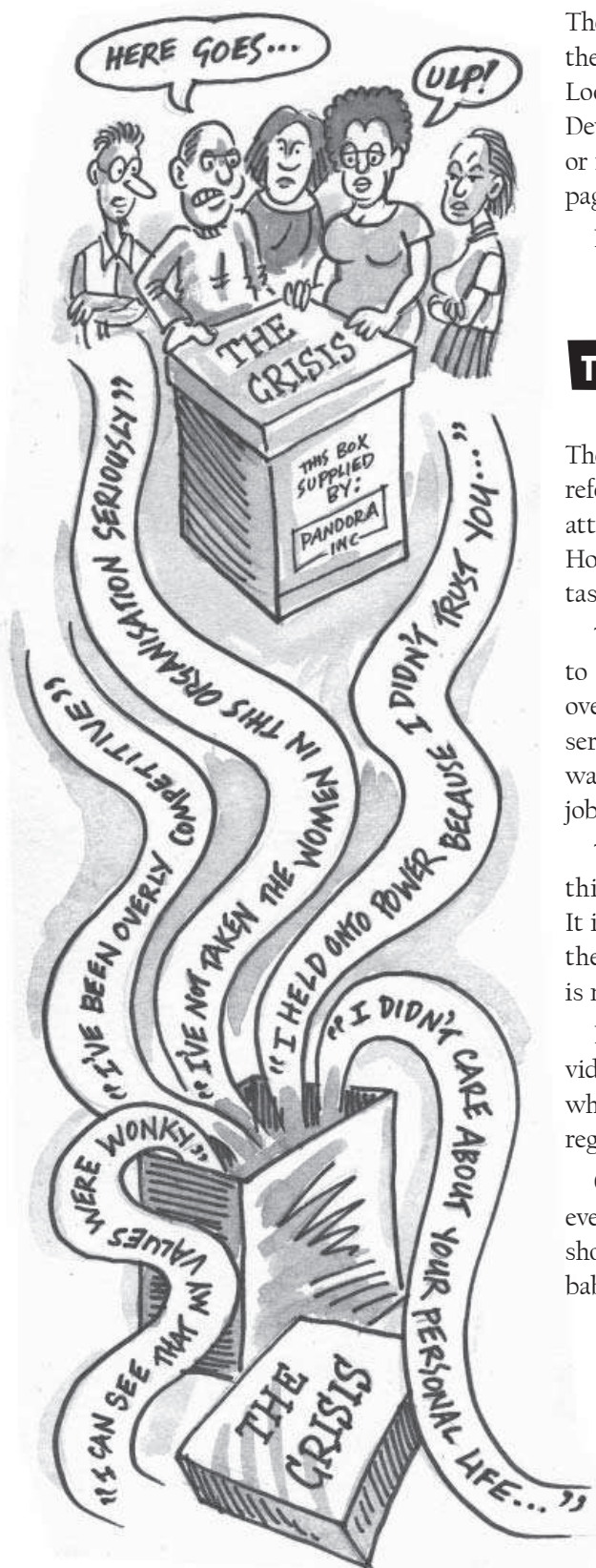
THE FOURTH TASK — testing the will for change

The fourth task is to test the will for change. Perhaps we can see the need for change and what has to be changed. But this does not automatically lead to change. We have to test the will for change.

This is the big turning point of the U-process, where the will for change is confronted and transformed. This is change at the Feet level. All the good work done up to this point will be incomplete and meaningless unless the will is also moved.

What often works here is asking each individual to spend some time alone asking these kinds of questions: "What do I **doubt**, in others and in myself? Who do I still **resent**? Do I **regret** anything I have done? What **fears** do I have of change? What will I personally lose if we let go of these things? What will happen if we don't change?"

Then the task is to give people an opportunity to share their answers to these questions with the group, one by one. Often just by sharing we realise that many others have the same answers and that we are not so far apart. So our doubts, fears and resentments become smaller and for most they become manageable or even disappear.

This task is critical, because without it there will only be a change of mind and of heart. The will must also change. As a leader you may be particularly challenged, possibly having to let go of some power.

Once the will for change has been surfaced and shared, you will have to ask yourself, as leader or facilitator, whether people are ready to move on to the next task. How will you know? It will usually become obvious by observing whether the mood and energy of the group has changed. If the process has worked you will most likely experience a sense of relief and a release of energy. People will start looking each other in the eye more, their bodies will be more up and forward, less slumped or dejected, they will be more sociable and chatty. If this is happening, let them enjoy each other's company for a while, informally, before moving on.

THE FIFTH TASK – renewing the foundations

The fifth task is to renew the foundations. This task is a renewal of the identity of the organisation: "What core values, attitudes, beliefs, thinking or world view do we want as new foundations for the future?"

This is the other side to the third task. You are now helping the organisation to find new or renewed foundations for the new, resolved future it is creating.

One way of surfacing these is to ask the group: "After this organisation is gone how would you want it to be remembered? What did it stand for? What was important to it?"
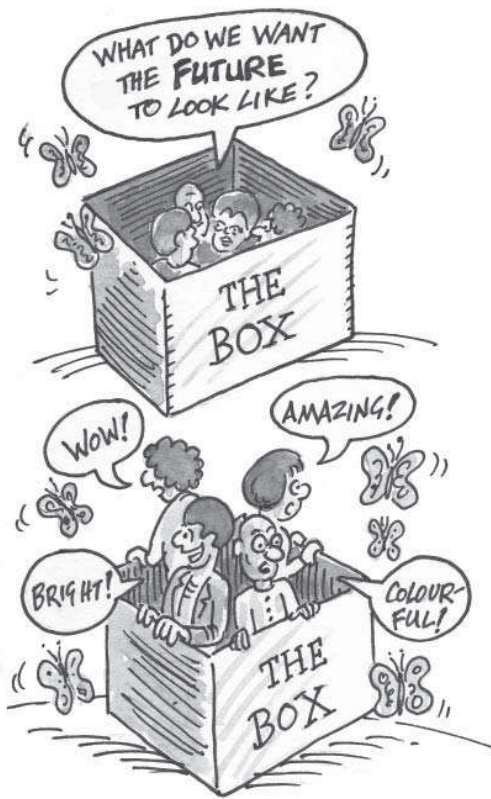
THE SIXTH TASK – creating a leading image or vision

The sixth task is to create a leading image or vision.

"What do we want the future to look like?"

This is a creative process – encourage people to think out of the box, to be bold and imaginative. But it is also a real process – encourage people to be realistic. This is a difficult balance to hold, but one way is to say to people: "Think of this organisation in two years' time – imagine you can take a bus there and spend a few days with it... what would you see and experience?"

Begin by asking what areas of the organisation they would like to develop a vision for. And then ask them to be quite concrete and detailed when they develop their descriptions of the future. This way you are more likely to help people to see if they really do agree with the changes, not just of what they have to let go of, but especially what they are going to be doing together, and how.

Again, make sure that everybody is together – respect the difficult voices!

THE SEVENTH TASK — planning for the new situation

The seventh task is planning for the new situation.

"What steps must we take towards the new leading image?"

The new leading image or vision may be quite ambitious. Make sure that it is achievable, and that the organisation is properly equipped for the journey. But remember, getting there is a step-by-step process.

A WORD ON TOOLS

There are many different tools, models or exercises and most facilitators have their favourite ones. A tool is only as good as the thinking and approach behind it. Sometimes our favourite tools are not appropriate and sometimes we need to create new tools out of the situation and culture of the people there.

"Make sure that your vision is achievable, and that you are properly equipped for the journey!"