

# CHAPTER FOUR

# Through the Looking Glass

Observing and understanding organisations

“ Understanding human needs is half the job of meeting them ”

Adlai Stevenson

HI THERE! I'M KIKI...

This chapter is an eye-opener, really! Full of different “windows”, stories, and practical guidelines for helping us understand our organisations, how they grow and develop, and where we can assist if they need to change.



## LOFTY TELLS THIS STORY...

My very first contract, as a young freelance organisational development facilitator, began with a phone call from the Director of a local Cape Town NGO. He called me in and told me he was experiencing difficulties with his Admin Team. In his eyes they were underperforming and he wanted me to interview them, find out what the problems were and write a report with recommendations to help “build their capacity.”

So I started by interviewing everyone to find the problems. After a while a pattern started to emerge. It seemed to me that the problem lay much more with the Director and his relationships with staff, and very little, as he had supposed, with the staff themselves. He was erratic and sometimes abusive. He sometimes shouted at them and one even burst into tears at the memory. None knew what was really expected of them and they were too afraid to ask. I could see that they felt on edge and undermined, leading to low confidence, silly mistakes, petty resistance and high turnover. I spoke to some of the field-staff and much of what they had said was confirmed.

*“It seemed that the problem lay with the Director!”*



*“Seems this guy is not only disorganised and erratic – he can also be quite abusive. One of their main complaints is that he shouts at them and puts them down in front of other staff members.”*

After the interviews, which included a general skills audit and a review of the admin systems, I wrote up a report. I described the admin systems as straightforward and workable, and that the skills required to operate them were well within the capabilities of the staff. Then I turned my sights on the Director and his relationships with the staff, boldly exposing what I had been told, with a clever analysis and a synopsis of the interviews (no names mentioned to respect confidentiality), ending with a set of smart recommendations. And all nicely laid out and printed from my new computer system. The report was delivered on time, the next day and I left feeling quite proud of my first job. I expected to be called back to help them implement some of my recommendations.

A day or two later I was tersely summonsed to a meeting by the Director. I arrived, feeling quite nervous, since I had not been thanked for the report yet. I found the Director and the Admin team sitting on one side of a long table and a chair for me on the other. The Director was judge, jury and prosecutor! He was furious with the report and refused to believe the things the staff had said – which they dutifully denied saying under his glare – and then he rejected my analysis and dismissed me. I had been summonsed, found guilty and banished!

Looking back I realized that I deserved this treatment – and I am surprised now that they even paid me!

#### QUESTIONS TO WORK WITH

- What attitudes and values guided the OD facilitator?
- What assumptions did he make about how people change?
- What would you have done differently?
- What were the Director’s challenges here in contracting and working with the facilitator?
- What learnings can you draw from this that might be apply to your practice?

The facilitator turned out to be just as misguided as the Director!



#### LEARNING FROM THIS STORY

Let’s unpack this story to see what exactly it was that went wrong.

First, it’s clear that the facilitator’s methodology, though conventional, was inadequate. First he interviewed the staff and observed their work and organisational systems. Nothing wrong there. Then he analysed the situation and came to some conclusions, based on his own “expert opinion”. A common enough thing to do, but this was where the trouble began. The cleverly phrased recommendations and the authoritative tone he adopted in the report made matters worse, because they showed up the Director in a bad light. As a result of the report, which would become a public document within the organisation, the Director was in a tight spot. He was faced with the prospect of a humiliating bring-down in

front of his staff. It's hardly surprising that he struck back with the classic "attack is the best form of defence" response.

The facilitator was so intent on exposing the truth and speaking up for the oppressed administrative staff that he didn't take the Director's possible reaction into account. He naively assumed that the truth would set everybody free. Instead, his intervention ended up reinforcing the divide between the Director and the staff, and the organisation was left worse off than before.

#### WHAT COULD THE FACILITATOR HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY?

Almost everything. Given that the real issues lay at the deeper level of attitudes, behaviours and relationships, he would have done far better to invest more time in building relationships and developing trust, before he began to formulate his responses. He certainly should have explored those things about the organisation that were working well, and tried to bring to the surface positive stuff that everybody could agree on.

Most important, though, was his relationship with the Director, who, as it turned out, was the person in the organisation who was most in need of help. If the facilitator had gone to speak to him privately and revealed the hard-to-hear things that the staff had said behind closed doors, he might have reacted differently. Given the opportunity to surface his own feelings and experiences, the Director might have been prepared to experiment with a new way of thinking.

*"The Director was in a tight spot. He was faced with the prospect of a humiliating bring-down in front of his staff."*



*“Was a written report really necessary?”*

He might even have ended up apologising to the staff for his rude, authoritarian and inconsiderate behaviour towards them. And, best of all, it might have been revealed that the problems weren't all his fault after all, but the result of a stuck dynamic that brought out the worst in them all.

Had there been a spirit of self-analysis and truth-telling, who knows what might have come out. It could have been a cathartic moment in which they became better able to understand what had happened to their organisation, leading to learning and reconciliation. The staff could then have been invited to make suggestions about how things might be done in future. Concluding his intervention by checking to see if there were still any lingering doubts, fears or resentments, the facilitator could have asked each staff member to say how they felt, before the group moved on to imagining a healthier future, followed by some practical steps to make it happen. To wrap up, there could have been a review to draw learnings from the process, followed by a closing round to allow the staff to rededicate themselves to making the changes work.

### WRITTEN REPORTS... DO THEY ALWAYS HELP?

And then there's the matter of the damning report. Was a written report really necessary? Written reports generally help to record resolutions, agreements and proposed steps forward, to note some of the learnings generated by the process. But where there is conflict, a report can serve to entrench polarised attitudes.

Organisations should rather be encouraged to document their own processes and write their own reports. In this way, they can become authors of their own future. Sometimes, an informal written reflection on what happened, what questions surfaced, and maybe even a few tips to help take the learnings forward, can be far more useful than a formal written report.

Sometimes, the best thing is for organisations to document their own processes, write their own reports, and become authors of their own future.

