

Change in Flow: How Critical Incidents Transform Organisations

Editors: Nancy Wallis and Maria Spindler

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Heike Brembach¹

Mastering conflicts in movement

Abstract

Physical body movement, both individually and collectively, can bring light to the shadow areas of conflict. This case study of a conflict within a leadership system will reflect on the four phases and the impact of process work with body movement interventions. The summary will identify principles of introducing body movement to the organisational context and highlight how body learning enables individuals to discover and expand their individual and collective competences in resolving conflict.

Keywords: process work, organisational development, movement, relations, conflict resolution, micro process

Movement is the soul of all things.
(Paul Klee)

Introduction

People within organisations are facing and coping with increasing complexity. Laloux (2014) defines organisations as vehicles of human collaboration. My definition of an organisation is that of a special link between the individual and the world. The limits of our current organisational model according to Laloux can be seen in a multiplicity of conflicts which may occur on any number of different levels. When a crisis shows effects without being adequately recognised as a crisis, it can frequently be observed that a system remains frozen in a state of exhaustion, mediocrity and unused potential.

¹ Translation by: Sabine Rehaber

Practitioners and facilitators of development processes within organisations are challenged to develop new approaches to deal with this increasing complexity.

The present article constitutes an extract of an organisational development process on a micro level as well as the use of working with movement as a form of intervention.

The organisational development process took place in an organisation which recently underwent a period of substantial and sudden growth: A new business sector was added to the core business of the organisation, which led to the employment of 60 new staff. The new structure necessitated the development of a joint understanding of the organisation and the new relationships within it. It also required coping with increased density of information and, in addition, reviewing and replacing current structures of communication where appropriate.

During this process it became increasingly apparent that a conflict existed between the Operations Manager and his team.

In the following, I will describe how work with movement was used as a form of intervention paving the way for conflict solution and how the interaction between movement, observation and feedback within the system led to specific and feasible solutions.

In addition, this article presents my selected findings and deductions for work with movement within the context of organisational development.

1 Movement as an Observational Tool

Having gained profound experience of movement with a pronounced kinaesthesia as well as deriving a fundamental joy from discovering the possibilities of movement during my time as a competitive athlete, I am particularly fascinated and inspired by Anna Halprin, a postmodern dancer, teacher and explorer of collective improvisations, and by the process work of Arnold

Mindell. Process work combines psychological, philosophical, sociological, political and modern physical concepts as well as various spiritual thoughts.

Both have dedicated their work to movement as an expression of internal processes, an access to knowledge as well as an aspect of processes and process work, although their approaches differ. Anna Halprin addresses various questions such as *What are the effects of movement on the individual as well as the collective body?* and *How does an organism respond to the challenges of its surroundings?* (Wittmann 2009)

Applying the methods of process oriented work enables the discovery of movements as distinct phenomena and the use of the messages inherent in these movements. Process work distinguishes between primary and secondary processes. The observations may go beyond those of the actual physical movement and may render non-local reactions measurable. (Mindell 2010)

I consider working with movement an essential supplement to the multitude of resource intensive cognitive approaches to the analysis, planning and implementation of change processes.

The term “movement” in this context signifies both a method and an empirical field. I combine this approach with one of the most fundamental underlying principles for performance enhancement in competitive sports: the exact, multidimensional and multiperspective reflection of performed – and therefore experienced – movement. Most significantly though, this reflection is the “treasure chest” for the process of change, for the most important aspect of movement is that it already contains the development and the solution.

Movement is life, and life is energy. Working with movement offers a unique approach to access the complex realm of empiricism. As a result, dynamics and relationships are tangible and visible as directions within a defined space. Working with movement allows us to determine the direction of energy of a system. It furthermore illustrates structures and their inherent qualities. Movement allows us to see the rhythm and speed acting synchronously or non-synchronously within a subsystem and/or a system in its entirety.

These categories may be directly transferred to the analysis and description of organisational structures. It is these organisational structures which are at the heart of the change if organisations wish to implement their development processes.

Once there exists an understanding of the correlation between external appearances visible in movement and internal structures inherent in the system, it is immediately possible to determine their functionality or dysfunctionality in fulfilling a predefined target. This is true for individuals as well as groups and organisations.

Expressing a particular situation by way of movement allows us to gain a level of knowledge which a) would not have been accessible as quickly on a cognitive level and b) would not have resulted in the complex understanding only movement is able to offer.

If this work is performed within a suitable observational and feedback setting, learning within the organisation will occur as a result, thus serving the purpose of changing the system. This signifies second order learning.

2 Description of the Situation Within the Organisation in Question History of the Conflict Between an Operations Manager and His Management Team

The process took place in an organisation which, as previously mentioned, recently experienced a period of substantial growth as a new business sector was added to the core business of the organisation, which led to the employment of 60 new staff. A new Director was appointed to head this new business sector together with a new management team of five.

The previous business sector was headed by an Operations Manager and six Department Managers, with three of the Department Managers also having Representatives.

We conduct three 2-day Management Team Coaching Sessions annually with the entire Management System. In addition to the “standard” content of such sessions, we have developed a comprehensive training programme which transcends the boundaries of departmental or hierarchical context. This specifically tailored training programme is also held annually. The Departmental Managers are paired up and head the training sessions with my external support. Following the training sessions, the Departmental Managers receive feedback from both the participants and me as the external consultant. The organisational system functions as an active Learning System.

In preparation for the imminent coaching session, the Operations Manager described to me in detail and with some difficulty what he perceived as an increasingly challenging relationship between himself and his Management Team. He complained about not receiving sufficient information from the Team and about feeling increasingly cut off from everyday business. This came as a surprise and was notable to me, as he had expressed his wish and in fact had demanded throughout the Management Team Coaching sessions over the last three years that the Departmental Managers work more independently - both individually and as a team - and specifically without continuously referring back to him. He reasoned that he was now responsible for two business sectors and that his workload had therefore increased exponentially.

One of the results of the Operations Manager’s demands was that the Departmental Managers subsequently decided to hold separate Departmental Meetings without his involvement. The Departmental Meetings were geared towards clarification of issues on a departmental level and have proven a helpful tool of communication among the Department Managers.

The Operations Manager asked my support in showing the widening chasm between himself and the Departmental Team and in finding a solution. He had previously tried to no avail to express his “desperation” to the team. In his view, the Department Managers continued to “do their own thing”. As the external consultant accompanying this development, I was both

concerned and at the same time pleased that the Department Managers had managed to develop some degree of independence. I interpreted their “deafness” to the Operations Manager’s growing concerns as an unconscious defence of their newly gained position. Now all we had to do was to find a new balance between the two opposing sides.

I discussed my idea with the Operations Manager to invite the members of the system to add new forms of learning to their own development process and to address the current issues by way of movement. My decision for this approach was based on the overall trustful relationship between the Team Members and myself, with the Team eagerly anticipating new and challenging approaches coming from me as the external consultant. The culture of togetherness is performance oriented.

The Management Team Coaching is targeted towards the entire Management Team consisting of the Operations Manager, the Director, the Departmental Managers of both business sectors and their respective representatives, adding up to a total of 15 participants. The agenda for this particular 2-day year-end coaching included taking the time to reflect on the past year both individually and collectively and to derive new approaches for the cooperation within the Management Team. Specifically, solutions were sought for the Operation Manager’s perceived conflict.

3 The Management Team Coaching as a Framework for Conflict Resolution

After a brief introductory round, I invited the Team to approach the current topics by way of working with movement as a new and unusual form of conflict resolution. I reminded them of a model of learning that they were already familiar with and announced that we would use movement to gain new insights in addition to the cognitive and emotional ways to access knowledge which they were already familiar with. A subsequent discussion served as an opportunity to reflect on the reactions to this announcement. My intention was to remove the “taboo” of movement as a form of conflict

resolution. The discussion showed that the individual Team Members were open to adopt this new approach even though opinions differed and concerns were raised. Subsequently, we conducted by way of movement the individual and collective Year End Review. This part of the process as well as the subsequent collective exercises to experience a collective rhythm are not the focus of this article and will therefore not be discussed in detail here.

I will, however, point out that the requirements and experiences of this first day of the coaching incorporating work with movement pushed both the participants' limits and my own.

However, experiencing these limits led to a deeper understanding on Day Two of the coaching of the concerns and opposing views raised the previous day. The issues concerning the work with movement anticipated by each participant when first reflecting on this approach were experienced first-hand during the actual movement exercise. Exchanging the individual views about these experiences led to a clearer understanding of each participants' own statements. It allowed the participants to clearly position themselves with regard to their individual decisions on the work with movement. Having had the opportunity to experience this new form of learning on the previous day, they were also better able to understand the previous day's learning model and incorporate it into their own life experiences.

I ensured that I was part of the above exercises and contributed my own experiences and perceptions, which led to the participants expressing their explicit trust in my work despite their individual levels of confusion.

This proved a good basis for addressing the conflict between the Operations Manager and the Management Team by way of movement.

In the following, I will describe the four stages of this process.

4 The Four Stages of the Conflict Resolution Process

What were the interventions for working with movement? Which effects and phenomena were observable individually and collectively?

Stage 1 - Description of the Conflict

The Operations Manager voiced his issues and his concerns. He described how he experienced the cooperation between himself and the team and how he felt about it.

Stage 2 - Expressing the Conflict in Movement

Following the Operations Manager's observations, I asked him to position himself at a distance to the team which felt comfortable to him. I specifically wanted to provide only a minimum of structural support. He decided to take a seat in one corner of the large room at a fairly large distance to the team. The rest of the team stood together, slightly surprised.

I then staged my next intervention: I asked the team to express in movement how they experienced the Department Managers' Meetings.

Initially, the entire team remained in the previous position. All of a sudden, the Department Managers retreated as a separate group. Their three Representatives remained where they were, seemingly irritated. They then moved a few steps to the side and seemed torn apart from the other part of the group. The Director took a few steps to one side and stated that he did not belong to the rest. The Operations Manager observed the scene smiling.

The result of this stage was that the entire team moved into its actual subgroups and thus experienced consciously how they are actually comprised of (and separated into) different parts. (At a later point in time outside of this coaching session, this experience was used to highlight the different functionalities of the subgroups and to address their cooperation.) It became clear that only one part of the team was directly related to the conflict. It

also became clear that there were two chasms within the team: that between the Operations Manager and the Department Managers and another one between the Department Managers and their Representatives.

The process was therefore able to proceed in two directions.

I decided to initially deviate from the original conflict and to address the newly visible constellation between the Department Managers and their Representatives.

First, I asked the Director to serve as an independent observer and to later offer his observations to the team. The Director happily agreed to his role.

Then, I asked the Representatives to observe the movement of the Department Managers' group.

I then asked the Department Managers' group again to express their group spirit in movement.

This time, their hesitation was only brief. They then linked arms and formed a circle. Following the guidance of one particular person within the group, a collective pattern of movement was developed. The participants moved four steps to one side, then four steps to the other. This rhythm intensified, the movement gained speed. Their view was focussed inwardly, with everyone concentrating on the "leader's" instructions. The group moved to the same rhythm and whenever the rhythm got lost momentarily, the "leader" demanded correction and cadence. The level of concentration was high and the group seemed impervious to its surroundings.

The observing participants were able to see clearly what they had been experiencing in their everyday management dealings, however, without previously being able to clearly interpret it. They were clearly torn between "We know this" and "We do not want this".

I interrupted for a moment to gain feedback from the Department Managers' group and to ensure that we could continue with the work. Everyone was happy to continue.

As a next step I asked the three Representatives to start moving and make contact with the Department Managers' group. While one of them remained seated, the two others slowly approached the group, which still moved in its own collective rhythm. Arriving at the group, they signalled their desire to join the group, hesitantly at first but increasingly clearly. Their efforts were noticed on some level on the part of the Department Managers' group but were largely ignored. Subsequent and increasingly forceful attempts on behalf of the two Representatives to get the group's attention did not "get through".

The third Representative, who had remained seated, the observing Director and the Operations Manager were fascinated by the very clear picture of separation of the subgroup. Thus, while one part of the team expressed their collective behaviour by way of movement, the other part of the team realised and understood the nature of the potential of the conflict. Observing the movement enabled clarity on an issue that previously could not be put into words but that was already present and exerted an effect on the entire system.

Since the observers are in reality a part of the entire system and not merely externally positioned observers, they have reached a new understanding how to influence the process as a whole as well as the individual relationships.

In my view, this is one of the crucial moments within the process as whole.

I interrupted the scenario and invited a short feedback which, again, will not be covered in this article in order to focus on the central issue at hand.

Stage 3 - Unfolding Conflict Resolution in Movement

After the feedback initially led to heated discussions, I initiated the stage of developing a solution through movement. I instructed the Department Managers to continue with their collective movement, to allow themselves to be completely absorbed in it. I then asked them to slow down the movement and to consciously experience it.

They complied with my request and experienced the slowness of their collective rhythm. After a while, I suggested that they follow their intuition, their impulse, to feel how the movement wanted to change in order to transform what had previously been experienced as a limitation. Slowly, the group opened up, various individual members started to follow their own rhythm, the directions of their movement varied, they raised their eyes and looked around the room. At the same time, it was visible that the bond between the Department Managers remained stable even without linked arms. Subsequently, the focus of the group changed from inward to outward. They noticed the other individuals in the room and the atmosphere relaxed.

As this stage came to a finish, I announced a short break.

Stage 4 - Connecting the Experienced Conflict Resolution and the Actual Conflict Situation

I advised the Department Managers' group to transfer the opening of the group they had just experienced and expressed in movement onto the actual current situation with their Operations Manager.

They were asked to specifically describe what they could do to bridge the chasm between them and the Operations Manager.

Within a matter of minutes, two distinct steps were identified and noted on a flipchart. The group then decided who was responsible for the implementation of each step.

The result was presented to the Operations Manager. After incorporating a minor adaptation at his request, the flipchart was signed off as a collective agreement by the entire Department Team.

5 Integration of the Conflict Resolution into the Daily Management Practice

Following the coaching, I was informed during several telephone conferences with some of the Department Managers and the Operations Manager that to everyone's surprise and joy, the steps that were signed off during the coaching were immediately implemented. This marked a clear difference to previous agreements. Until today, they form a crucial part of the management practice. One very unusual feedback I received for this work was:

That was spooky!

6 Deductions and Summary

To date, movement has been used hesitantly in the learning field of organisations. There are a number of reasons for this. Movement is a complex phenomenon. On the one hand, it is a standard process while at the same time, it is very intimate. Movement sometimes seems simple: After all, everyone moves. However, movement is generally seen as a secondary phenomenon accompanying our primary activities. As soon as the focus changes, putting movement at the centre of perception, its complexity becomes apparent and it discloses our essence to us. Through movement, both the conscious and the unconscious are expressed. Work with movement may occur in a planned manner or as a spontaneous approach. The mindfulness and perception of the consultant are decisive factors for using movement as a learning field. Movement (only) shows what is there (Mindell 1997) - covering that which wants to be seen as well as that which the individual, the collective or the organisation initially or generally does not want to realise. Movement cannot be made visible without its shadows.

I have focussed here on one particular case study. The concepts of thought and theory that define my work are multifaceted and it is therefore difficult to discuss them in the context of this article. They may best be summed up by the translated words of Paul Klee which have always deeply moved me and informed my understanding: Movement is the soul of all things.

I have described the above micro process to highlight the possibility to gain knowledge through movement in a very effective and naturalistic way and to develop solutions for critical situations. To shape and direct the dialogue incorporating the dark sides that become visible is, to me, one of the core challenges of external consultancy: to structure feedback and communication processes relating to the observed phenomena and to provide support in “translating” these phenomena. Methodical instruction may of course be available. However, the direction and quality of this dialogue will always be largely determined by the inner movement of the external consultant. This inner movement may not be suitable for every context. Nor will every point in time be suitable. The intuition for the best moment, the courage to do it and the disclosure of one’s own feedback and reactions can lead the entire system or team to experience lively and thrilling development processes. Allowing the process of development to be expressed through movement proves more effective as it is closer to life than simply training new behavioural patterns. Through observation, reflexion and change of movement, we can arrive at a collective wisdom contained in the movement (Joubert 2010).

It is my vision to contribute through work with movement and all its possibilities to opening up new areas of experience and knowledge which may serve to transform individual, collective and organisational wisdom into effectiveness.

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