

Transforming Business Relationships

Relationships Foundation associate Paul Sandham looks at the importance of relationships in organisations.

"What do you do Dad?"

"Well I'm what you might call a Strategic Organisation Consultant."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, Strategic is a euphemism for important, complicated and expensive. Organisation is a bunch of people trying to achieve something and Consultant can mean anything you want it to mean."

"So what do you actually do?"

"Well I facilitate skilful dialogue between organisations, teams and individuals."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I stimulate the sorts of conversations that strengthen relationships and leads to sustainable change."

"You mean you help people talk to each other?"

"Yes"

The above, slightly modified, conversation took place with my 10-year-old daughter Beth about a year ago. It hints at five important truths:

1. Beth is perceptive and I am pretentious
2. Organisational change is about transforming relationships
3. Relationships are primarily conversational in nature
4. Conversations about relationship issues can be difficult
5. There is value, both socially and professionally, in helping people find a language for talking about relationships.

Over the last 15 years I have built a professional practice around these truths i.e. helping different people in different organisations with seemingly different issues to talk about the same thing, namely "How can we make this relationship work?".

My profession has developed many ways of helping people address this question. We take them to remote forests to hug trees and whip themselves with birch twigs. We get them to confess undying love for each other in Encounter Groups or we get them to build a bridge across a 100ft ravine whilst blindfolded using only a ball of string, a suspender belt and a slightly bent knitting needle.

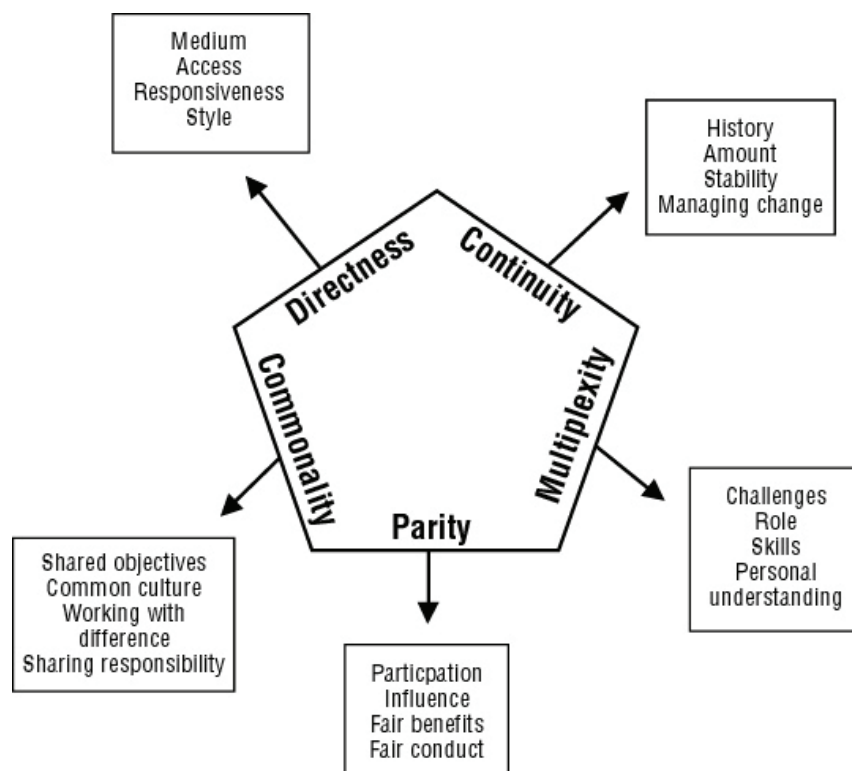
Whilst I am being clearly deliberately facetious, there is a truth to the fact that until fairly recently there has been little by way of rigorous theory or practical process for getting organisations, teams and individuals to tackle real life relationship issues.

So Relationships Foundation's theory of Relationism, its model of Relational Proximity, and its methodology of Relational Health Auditing are intellectually innovative, socially very timely and pragmatically extremely useful.

I first used Relationships Foundation's 'relational auditing toolkit' five years ago and it is now incorporated into the heart of my consulting practice. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it enables consultants like myself to facilitate really meaningful conversations between people about the very thing they find it difficult to talk about, namely their relationships.

The default language for talking about relationships is trust and chemistry i.e. 'do we trust each other?' and 'do we like each other?' These are emotive questions that require an environment of openness and respect, the very qualities that may be absent from the relationship. In contrast, the language and concepts used in the Relational Auditing Tools is straightforward, relatively unemotive, and non-judgemental. This means that even very difficult relationship issues can be talked about and explored.

Many supporters of Relationships Foundation will be familiar with *Relational Proximity* but just by way of a reminder, here are the 5 dimensions and 20 factors that form the basis of the auditing process and the subsequent facilitated dialogues:



I have successfully used the above model and its associated methodologies in numerous ways with numerous clients. Assignments have included:

- Facilitating dialogue between Board Directors in a media company about their working relationship
- Helping a global Supplier to unravel the dynamics of a deteriorating relationship with a European client
- Providing a forum for departments within a Regional Development Agency to discuss concerns regarding internal relationships
- Hosting an offsite forum for partners in a strategic alliance to build trust around the sharing of intellectual capital
- Enabling an energy company to examine its relationships with its strategic partners.

Obviously for confidentiality reasons, I cannot give more details about the above assignments. What I can say, however, is that Relationships Foundation's tools and models added significant value every time relationships issues have come to the surface – and it is my experience that most business or organisational problems and opportunities are in some way linked to relationships.

It is reasonable to ask “Will these tools make a difference and improve my bottom line?”. My response is to quote a former Unilever Chairman who said "I know that half of my advertising is wasted. The trouble is that I don't know which half." It's the same with relationships. Everyone agrees that it is worth investing in them but few know how to do it wisely. It can be an expensive business to throw money at improving relationships. The beauty of Relationships Foundation's models and tools is that, by helping to map out where a relationship is weak and where it is strong, it provides clear pointers on what can be done to strengthen it. This makes for highly impactful, cost efficient and robust consultancy interventions, which in turn lead to more effective organisations, happier employees and better performing teams. So even if I only help people to talk to each other, maybe I really am a Strategic Organisation Consultant.

Paul Sandham is a management consultant, coach, facilitator and mediator. His organisation, 'Sandhams' is a partner in Relationship Foundation's relational consultancy team carrying out audits and providing consultancy to businesses.

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think relationally