

CHAPTER SEVEN

PRACTISING POWER: UNDISCUSSABLES, POWER AND HRD

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Introduction

A growing literature identified as Critical Action Learning (CAL) identifies Action Learning (AL) sets to be far from the neutral sites of learning perhaps once considered (Vince and Martin 1993; Vince 2001; Vince 2004; Trehan 2011). In particular, the power relations at work within the set are now understood to be constantly forming and reforming, and while doing so shaping conversations, decision-making and learning within the set. Consequently, CAL has recently, at least in relation to the broader Action Learning tradition from which it has sprung, become a vehicle for those interested in the subtle functioning of the set itself, and the power of AL to challenge entrenched power relations inside and outside the organisation.

One useful research interest within the domain of CAL is the exploration of the relationship between power and undiscussables as a means of understanding how power is practically used to shape and constitute conversations in decision-making business meetings. In particular, this chapter includes research (Donovan 2014) conducted with multiple senior executive groups who, for a designated period, elected to become AL sets while working on specific organisational issues. Consequently, the groups had committed to the dual purposes of acting and learning while addressing the identified issues.

Undiscussables, formerly known as “non-discussables” have been a point of discussion for over 30 years. Their widespread and far-reaching effect on collective effectiveness has been well documented (Argyris 1986; Argyris 1990; Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen 2008). Chris Argyris maintained that they were in good part responsible for the “fancy

footwork” that predominates many business meetings and prevents honest, robust inquiry of critical assumptions, problems and solutions.

While it should be acknowledged that any one might participate in generating an undiscussable simply by withholding, this chapter looks particularly at the leaders of AL sets, with the rank and privilege that comes with acknowledged positions of influence. It examines how they might exercise power in such a way that others might become more unwilling to disclose, and undiscussable topics or points of view are generated.

This chapter continues with a comment on the methodological challenges associated with researching undiscussables, and then follows with a brief review of Argyris’s work as foundational to understanding undiscussables. CAL is then consulted with a view to understanding the problem from those who make power relations within AL a deliberate focus. Next, key theorists, including Bourdieu, Mindell and Lukes are then briefly reviewed as a context to presenting specific research that examined AL sets and the conversational moves that appeared to exercise power and generate undiscussables, the data collected and its analysis. Finally, the chapter examines the implications of this research on human resources (HR), and explores the possibility of senior HR professionals assuming a more disruptive role that interrupts these common conversational patterns.

Methodological challenges

Researching undiscussables presents rather specific challenges. If the topic does in fact remain “undiscussable”, then the only means available for the researcher to gain insight to the avoided topics is to hear about them in one-on-one interviews or a sub-group conversation of some kind. In that context, the researcher is unable to report those conversations, even if they give unusual insight into the “undiscussables”, since they are likely to be disclosed by participants with a request to prevent such being communicated to the remainder of the group. Therefore there do exist some challenges in utilising Action Learning, Action Research (ALAR) or ethnographic approaches to the study of “undiscussables”, if those undiscussables remain so to at least part of the group.

In that context, it is argued that in relation to the study of undiscussables, statements and actions observed, at the time of negative affect, are particularly useful. Supporting this thesis is the research of Vince, Argyris and Schon, and my own long-term experience as a corporate and AL set facilitator. Firstly, as described above, Vince (2001, 2002) and others argued for the centrality of emotion in the study of

organisational learning since individual and collective anxiety was likely to co-exist with learning. This was because where learning did occur, disruption to existing power relations was usually provoked, and defensiveness or resistance tended to be triggered at such times. Consequently times of visible negative affect could be helpful in relation to understanding the exercise of power within any set. Likewise, Argyris and Schon (Argyris 1990; Argyris and Schon 1991), as described below, argued that moments of collective threat or embarrassment were especially helpful in understanding what theories-in-use were in operation in the group. Consequently, they placed considerable emphasis on such data. Likewise, my own 15 years of experience as an AR (Action Research) and AL set facilitator had showed that moments of strong negative feeling (and positive feeling for that matter), can be especially valuable in understanding some of the less obvious dynamics and power relations within and outside the set.

Chris Argyris and undiscussables

Chris Argyris was the first to describe “non-discussables”, later called undiscussables, and identified them as a substantial problem for business groups and their meetings (1986, 1990, 1993, 1995). He defined them as topics that were avoided due to an associated threat or embarrassment, and where that avoidance was in turn not discussed. Meetings that navigated around potentially threatening topics became flat, stilted, boring, and dangerously irrelevant. He described the “fancy footwork” that characterised these meetings as “anti-learning and overprotective” (Argyris 1978).

Argyris also said that groups’ behaviour in navigating around contentious issues was in fact “skillful” since it is produced in milliseconds, is spontaneous, automatic and unrehearsed. For this reason, he called it “skilled incompetence” because it produces what they do not intend (mediocre managerial stewardship) and they do so repeatedly, even though no one is forcing them (1986).

As background to the above, Argyris maintained that we hold two “programs” in our head; one contains a set of beliefs and values describing how each individual should maintain their lives and the other the actual rules they use to manage those beliefs and their actual behaviour in the world. The first is their espoused theories of action; the second is their theories-in-use.

Because the behaviours demonstrating theory-in-use are observable, Argyris was able to discover that while the behaviours varied from person to person, the actual theory-in-use did not. He called this theory Model 1.

Model 1 theory-in-use instructs individuals to seek to be in unilateral control, to win, and to not upset people. It therefore informs action strategies that are primarily selling and persuading, “easing others in”, and strategies to save their own and others’ face (Argyris and Schon 1974).

The dilemma with Model 1 emerges because of its authoritarian features. For its use to be effective, the recipient must become submissive, passive and dependent, which is of course opposite to Model 1. Therefore, if Model 1 is defined as the effective theory-in-use, its implementation requires others to be ineffective by the very terms of Model 1. The intention to win, and to win over by persuasion while keeping all parties on an emotional equilibrium and looking in control, ensures issues or topics that might threaten a convincing argument, prompt upset, or embarrass, are avoided. Therefore, where Model 1 is applied, undiscussables get generated.

Argyris and Schon (1974) offered an alternative model, which he called Model 2. The governing values of this model are valid information, informed choice and responsibility to monitor how well the choice is implemented. Model 2 is characterised by less “sell”, less “strategising”, more transparency about what one is trying to achieve in the conversation, and an open invitation to make inquiry about one’s reasoning and assumptions in that conversation. In short, more vulnerability. Consequently, it follows that Model 2 conversations would not tend to generate undiscussables. At the same time, Argyris found little or no evidence of Model 2 in action in the groups he studied.

It is within the context of Model 2 being practised that Argyris proposed that “double-loop learning” might then become operational. As opposed to single-loop learning, where conversation is limited to solutions that immediately fix presenting problems, double-loop learning invites contributors to make more transparent the associated assumptions and pre-existing beliefs that might be framing or causing the problem, or the proposed solutions.

Since Argyris, others have looked at the effect of undiscussables. Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (2000) found the “unsaid” was responsible for unresolved tension and the persistence of unexplored business dilemmas. Runde and Flanagan (2008) proposed that the ability to discuss contentious topics was a defining competence for effective teams, and the absence of such yielded short-term frustration and long-term disappointment. Donovan (2011) found the conversational strategies employed by AL sets avoiding topics resulted in important issues remaining unaddressed. Others have explored the effect of undiscussables and found similar results. (Morrison and Milliken 2000; Baker 2004;

Noonan 2007; Avery and Steingard 2008; Mclain Smith 2008; Runde and Flanagan 2008; Hammond, Annis et al. 2011). In short, many business meetings have become tedious and superficial and the presence of undiscussables is strongly indicated. Undiscussables remain a central concern as they relate to the persistent problem of frustrating and ineffective meetings, where both collective decision-making and learning are required.

CAL and the AL set

CAL, a recent manifestation of Revanesque thought, brings the above dynamics centre stage in the life of an AL set. It could also be said that if there were ever a kind of meeting that might be a candidate for the generation of undiscussables, it would be that held by the AL set. The ambitious, challenging work of the AL set requires collective conversation to carefully observe existing reality, reflect on assumptions, and thereby enable the group planning to be effective. This could be confronting for some, and uncomfortable topics may loom up ahead like hazard signs on a remote highway. Not only that; if one considers the relatively recent theorising of learning within organisations by Stacey (2003) and Clegg et al. (2005), required is nuanced dialogue on sensitive issues (Donovan 2013). In particular, Clegg et al. considers learning conversations to be in the “tension” between chaos and predictability, where uncertainty and ambiguity reside.

A small group of important workers have created a platform upon which subsequent CAL is currently being built. They are Reynolds, (1998; 1999a; 1999), Willmott (1997) Vince (2001, 2004 and 2008) and more recently Trehan (Ram and Trehan 2009; Trehan 2011; Rigg and Trehan 2004). Early critical theorists in turn formed an important context for these.

Fundamental to the approach advocated by CAL is the foregrounding of tacit assumptions in relation to policy and practice, and the

...explicit engagement with the tension, contradictions, emotions and power dynamics that inevitably exist both within a group and in individual managers' lives. (Trehan 2011)

Vince (2001, 2002, 2008) has written with much effect on the challenging emotional territory traversed by many AL sets, and the usefulness of examining collective and individual emotions (especially

anxiety) as means of making visible power relations. As Vince and Martin (1993) said years ago:

We believe that bias is always present in learning groups, that it shapes the language and the interaction used to address a work task. In addition, we believe that set/group members will bring, and act out, social power relations as an inevitable part of the group process. (p. 208)

Vince and Martin describe the AL set as a site beset with subtle (or not so subtle) power relations that will shape and form the group's action and learning. And they are not alone in such a description. Trehan (2011), in advocating the role of facilitator in AL sets describes the context for learning by AL sets in the following way:

participants resist or reinforce power relations that develop from learning inaction...(and) the complex dynamics that influence collective reflection. (p. 168)

Cherry (2010) discussed a related problem when supporting her PhD students in action research projects.

As an academic supervisor of many action research projects over a long period of time, much of my own effort has been focused on helping action researchers to stay in the action and not to retreat to the margins where they write intense, anguished reflective pieces about their difficulties but accomplish very little. (p. 239)

She goes on to say of the meetings where action and learning are required;

(they are)...concerned with challenging the mindsets of organisations and whole societies. Whatever its scale, this is not work for the faint-hearted. (p. 243)

To many AL practitioners, these observations are likely to resonate strongly. While Reg Revans (1987) may not have highlighted these subtle but decidedly practical difficulties in the life of an AL set, some of us experience them with regularity.

While there has been acknowledgement of power relations at work in AL sets shaping learning and action, very little research has specifically explored the subtle relationship between power and undiscussables. How do some members, especially leaders, actually precipitate in others an unwillingness to disclose? How do they conversationally, or otherwise,

actually exercise power to create such an effect? The following section reviews some theorists on power, followed by a consideration of data collected from various AL sets in the context of those theorists.

Power and undiscussables: a conceptual frame

In this section, the relationship between power and undiscussables has been briefly discussed through the lens of three key theorists: Bourdieu, Mindell and Lukes. While these do not represent an entirely comprehensive analysis of the operations of organisational power, they do serve as illustrative and are supplemented by useful other theorists such as Clegg (1989), Parsons (1967) and Foucault (1994).

Bourdieu was a renowned French sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher who authored several books and vigorously engaged in academic, and later in his life, public, discourse. While Bourdieu (1987) created a considerable body of work, and most famously developed the conceptualisation of the “Habitus”, the part of most interest here is the various kinds of “capital” that he contended were utilised, or exercised as power by social agents. He specifically identified four different kinds of capital each of which can be utilised by an agent in a social setting. They are economic, cultural (primarily related to knowledge and information), social (primarily related to connections and group membership) and symbolic capital, which all the others transmute to when they are perceived as legitimate. Each of these kinds of capital brings rank and privilege to the social agents who possess them. While the first of these “capitals” is objective, the others are subjective, and in his view at least as important in providing means of exercising social power.

In connection to the power that is exercised by those with capital, Brubaker (1985) described Bourdieu as identifying two kinds of power, one material or economic, one symbolic, with the understanding that even economic power has a crucial symbolic dimension. He describes these forms of power as interconvertable, where it is understood they may transmute into each other, or exist in the absence of the other.

Of particular importance to this review is the effectiveness of symbolic power. Brubaker (1985), in describing Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic power, and how others experience it when it is exercised, says:

It is not perceived as power, but a source of legitimate demands on the services of others, whether material...or symbolic, such as the expression of deference; and it is precisely this perception or misrecognition that makes it effective as a form of power. (p. 756)

It is here that Bourdieu's theorising (as expressed by Brubaker) may be at its most helpful in the context of understanding the exercise of power and undiscussables. When agents exercise symbolic power, many of those to whom the power is exercised may barely identify that power has been exercised at all. It is subtle. The scenarios where this kind of power is exercised are generally embedded as cultural norms. For example, in a corporate setting, those with rank may decide what items are included (and not included) in a meeting agenda, and this practice appears to be broadly accepted. In addition, as described later, those with rank may even unilaterally close certain conversations in a meeting, and do so with little or no apparent resistance if those in the meeting consider it to be an appropriate right of the leader. Consequently, the legitimacy of the demands of the person exercising symbolic power seems self-evident, may not be tested, and indeed possibly "not perceived as power" at all. Perhaps a related proposition is that those who are exercising symbolic power may also have little or no awareness they are in fact exercising power, primarily because of the same accepted norms and tacit assumptions about the anticipated and expected nature of their practices. These notions will be further explored later.

Mindell, a psychologist and physicist, has also provided a useful and relevant contribution to the area of power. While he has published extensively for an audience of practitioners (Mindell 1992, 2000, 2002, 2010), he has not engaged in academic research and publication. There is, however, in addition to a number of texts exploring further the philosophy and application of his ideas (Goodbread 1997; Diamond and Spark Jones 2004; Goodbread 2009), a growing body of research that examines Mindell's conceptualisations, especially in the area of social rank and power (Audergon 2004; Audergon and Arye 2005; Morin 2006; Collett 2007). It's also partly because of his significant presence in the life of so many practitioners around the world that his work has been referenced here. He established the Process Work Institute in 1991, and institutes are now established on every continent. Every year thousands of facilitators attend workshops facilitated by a highly qualified faculty, and so far about 120 have graduated with Process Work Master's degrees of some kind.

Mindell also discussed power using the associated ideas of rank and privilege and suggested rank has certain privilege associated to it, and that appropriating those privileges is an exercise of power (Mindell 1992, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2010). He described rank to be a kind of potential energy, which may or may not be used. While he categorised various kinds of rank (including psychological and spiritual), the most relevant kind to this study is what he called social rank. Mindell said that for any

human group, our gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and age give us more or less social rank than that of others. Added to this can be the rank provided by organisational positions that are higher in the hierarchy to other positions. While a detailed comparison of Mindell and Bourdieu is beyond scope, many of the terms used by Mindell, including field, rank and privilege, and their associated meaning, have overlap with Bourdieu.

Interestingly, Mindell, in his predictably practical approach, maintains that generally, the more rank we possess, the less aware we tend to be of the associated privilege. Importantly, he finds this lack of awareness to be a primary cause of conflict. That is, privilege being enjoyed without understanding and acknowledgement that indeed a privilege has been accessed, tends to create angst in others. Mindell's notion of unwittingly accessing privilege provides a novel lens through which to observe groups who are attempting to discuss threatening topics. Considering how those with rank in such conversations may draw on their privilege to lessen their sense of threat, without acknowledging they are doing so, may provide a useful portal to investigate how power might be exercised in conversations. In other words, Mindell's conceptualisations may be of practical assistance in understanding how power is being exercised, and conflict created, in our everyday experience. It was this potential strength of Mindell's approach that was of particular interest in this study.

Mindell does not, however, provide any further distinctions in relation to the kinds of conflict that might be triggered, or to the power that might be associated with those various kinds of conflict. In addition, the connection between the exercise of power via the use of rank, and undiscussables, is not directly explored.

Lukes, using a more sociological perspective, distinguished three dimensions of power that are in turn subtler and potentially more pervasive (Lukes 2005). One-dimensional power is limited to discrete situations where person A has power over person B, to get them to do something they don't want to do. Helpfully, Clegg (1989) clarified that overt resistance and visible conflict evidence one-dimensional power. Two-dimensional power was first elaborated by Bachrach and Baratz (1962, 1970) who suggested that the hidden face of power was not about who won or lost, but about which issues and/or actors were prevented from coming to the table in the first place. In other words, a "mobilisation of bias" may be at work suppressing certain interactions. Lukes (2005, 22), quoting Bachrach and Baratz argues that "...power may be, and often is, exercised by confining the scope of decision-making to relatively 'safe' issues". Therefore, two-dimensional power is not just about the challenge of one party openly attempting to dominate another, (as in one-

dimensional power), but it concerns *who* participates in the conversation, and *what* is discussed in that conversation. Covert conflict and the stifled resistance of a party who is struggling to be heard in the most effective forum evidence it. Lukes (2005), in offering a radicalisation of two-dimensional power, suggested:

the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place. (p. 27)

He therefore conceived of three-dimensional power where the powerful achieve this by influencing consciousness by the control of information, the mass media and the process of socialisation. Gaventa (1980) and Clegg (1989) note that where three-dimensional power is exercised, it may be accompanied by resignation, hopelessness and acceptance. Therefore, person B may no longer resist, overtly or covertly, as in one- and two-dimensional power respectively, but rather appear to willingly do what A wants them to do, even though it is contrary to their objective, real interests. The conflict here is therefore latent.

In drawing distinctions in relation to types of power and associated conflict, Lukes provides an available means to connect power more directly to the phenomenon of undiscussables. For instance, it might be expected that overt conflict might be associated with less undiscussables than covert conflict, where resistance cannot be easily voiced. Further, latent conflict may also be expected to be associated with undiscussables, but awareness of them may be minimal.

In summary, Bourdieu, through the conceptualisation of subjective kinds of “capital”, showed that “symbolic” power can be exercised by those with enough of it, and because of our socialisation, we may not notice when such power has been applied. Mindell, through his more practical exploration of rank, power and privilege, saw that we tend to create conflict, usually unwittingly, by the exercise of power without awareness. Lukes, in proposing his three dimensions of power, showed how each resulted in a different kind of conflict. The section to follow combines these conceptualisations, and proposes how power might be exercised within AL sets to generate undiscussables.

Three ways executive group team leaders may mediate power to generate undiscussables

The following section describes three categories of activities by which executive group leaders seem to mediate power, and ultimately the strong

possibility of undiscussables. They were first published by Donovan (Donovan 2014) in his research that examined various senior executive teams who had committed to becoming an AL set while addressing certain organisational concerns. In other words, they actively engaged in the action, observation, reflection and planning cycle to enable them to prioritise their learning while taking action. The research was conducted with various executive groups over the period they made this commitment, and specifically examined were the conversational patterns of those with rank in the group.

1. Those with rank dismissing topics in a meeting.

A certain category of contribution from those identified as having rank in the group consists of comments that work to dismiss topics as no longer deserving their attention or the attention of the group. Various languaging can be used to achieve this end, and some are more direct than others. Examples that constitute this category are listed below, and one or more may sound familiar to those who have experienced this kind of event:

“Let’s now take this topic off-line.”

“We have spent enough time on this topic, and therefore I would ask that Bob provide us with an update/report on this next time we meet.”

“We are not getting anywhere here and need to move on...”

“It seems like we are going around in circles, so let’s progress to the next item.”

“Time is short; I suggest we have a sub-group look at this, so we can keep going.”

It is proposed that the person speaking, most usually the manager of the group, had “rank”, or in Bourdieu’s language, possessed more cultural capital within the organisation. The implication of the person with rank’s dismissal of the topic is that to spend further time on the subject is wasteful or negative, and that his or her expert knowledge and experience gives them the capacity to make such a distinction, when others in the team may not. And because of this assertion, they close down the discussion. Importantly, in many cases the people with rank doing the closing do not explain their action or reasoning, or request feedback on that reasoning. Instead, they exercise power by accessing privilege associated to their rank, without acknowledgement that they are doing so.

According to Bourdieu’s theory, these leaders are exercising symbolic power afforded them by virtue of their hierarchical status, to unilaterally close down conversation. In my experience, in most cases no objection is

raised, which is entirely consistent with Bourdieu's description of the use of symbolic power. That is, it may achieve its aim partly because it is often not noticed or recognised, at least in the first place, and consequently not challenged.

Mindell, however, suggested that exercising power without acknowledgement (or awareness) is likely to create angst or conflict in others. Therefore, even if compliance is achieved as Bourdieu observed, covert conflict may ultimately eventuate.

In connection to Lukes' conceptualisations, it is proposed that when the person with rank (or more cultural capital) dismisses the topic, they are exercising one- or two-dimensional power, depending on the response of the team. On the few occasions where team members openly object, active resistance was visible and one-dimensional power is exercised. Undiscussables are minimised. When those in the meeting do not raise their concerns (on the occasions when they might have had them), they are then unable to be heard in that forum in relation to the topic being dismissed, or their feelings about the topic being dismissed. Conflict becomes covert, two-dimensional power is exercised and undiscussables likely generated.

The above reasoning is graphically shown in Figure 7-1. Beginning at the top, the person with more rank or cultural capital exercises power in relation to person B who had less rank, without acknowledging they were doing so. The kind of conflict that occurred in response provided an indication in relation to which dimension of power had been exercised, as per the previous discussion. Likewise, the implications of each kind of power in relation to undiscussables are also shown.

2. Liberal expressions of anger by those with rank.

The second example of contributions by executive group leaders while the group had committed to function as an AL set relates to liberal expressions of anger. Below are listed examples. The tonality, which cannot easily be conveyed in these short sentences, is critical, and central to the experience of others in the AL set. The tonality usually conveys one or a combination of the following: aggression, impatience, irritation or exasperation.

“Why can't you just get this right?”

“How long does it take to get an accurate answer around here?”

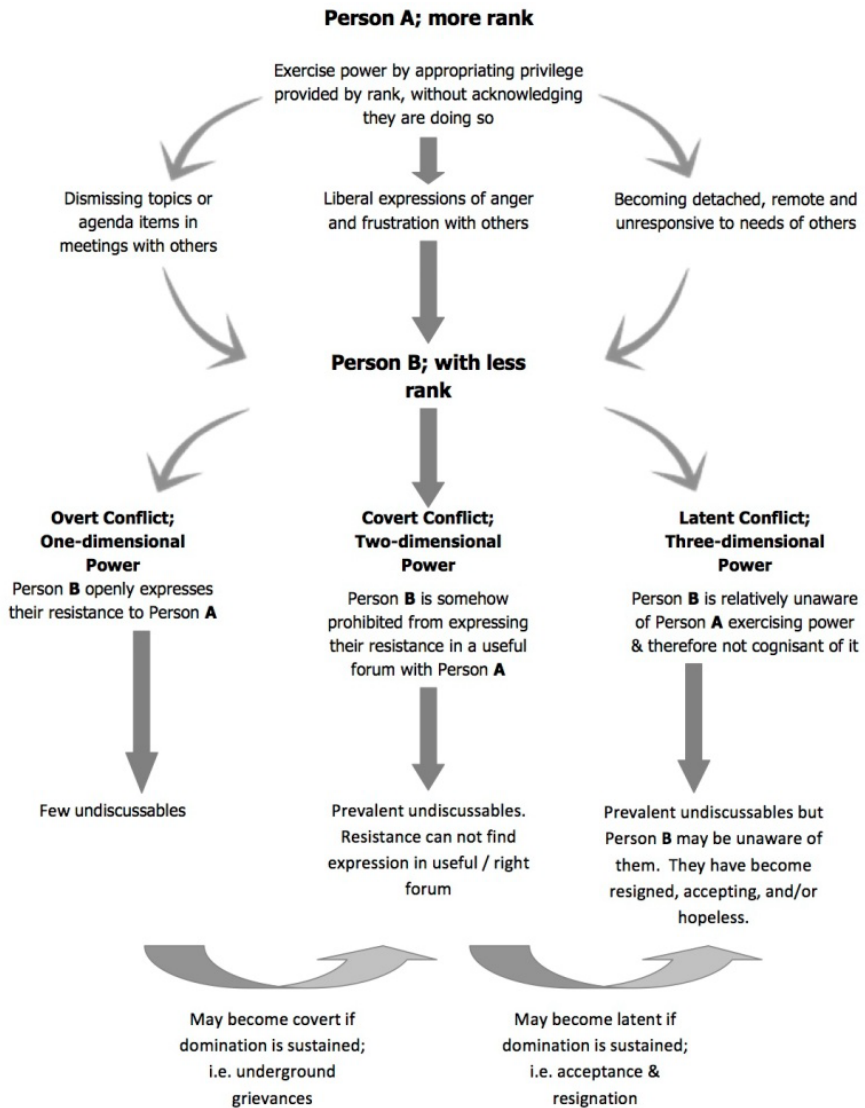
“Now I'm mad, and things will change around here... Watch.”

“What? The report has not been finished yet?”

“What would you say is the main reason for this failure?”

“They can't do this; they're imbeciles.”

Figure 7-1: Power, conflict and undiscussables



The response of the remaining AL set to these comments by the leader is usually an awkward pause or silence. It is proposed that when those with more cultural capital, or more rank as Mindell might express it, openly and liberally expressed anger in the AL set meeting as shown above, it constitutes an appropriation of privilege, and an exercise of symbolic power (also shown in Figure 7-1). As a point of explanation, at that moment, they are appropriating the privilege of not needing to exercise self-discipline in relation to their expression of anger and frustration. The remainder of the team are likely to be aware that they don't enjoy the same privilege of being able to freely express their anger towards the person with rank, and even possibly with each other. In some cases, to do so may ultimately threaten their employment. Further, in many instances the leader does not acknowledge that he or she was drawing on their social "capital" or rank to do so. As Brubaker also explained of Bourdieu's symbolic power, our social conditioning is such that we barely know when that power has been applied. Somehow, in the case of this exercise of power, it is collectively understood that the boss had the right to lose their temper, a right the rest of the set don't possess.

Where, on the rare occasion the team raises their concerns with the person with rank about his or her outburst of anger, Lukes' one-dimensional power has been exercised and overt resistance was evidenced. It is argued here that undiscussables are minimised in that case. The more common response of an awkward silence would seem to evidence a possible discomfort that remains underground, and in that case second-dimension power is being exercised. A bypassing of topics, at least on the topic of the leader's outburst, or perhaps from any topic that might prompt further outburst, is likely. In short, the team may actively withhold in relation to some important concerns, and undiscussables are created.

As Clegg (1989) confirmed, this expression of power can be difficult to perceive when compared to one-dimensional power, since the usual behavioural signs of meeting conflict are not easily visible. Interestingly, the person with rank, or leader, although generating undiscussables through their unacknowledged exercise of power, in turn tends not to raise the issue that those in the meeting seemed uncomfortable about or were withholding on. To do so would blow the whistle on their original exercise of power.

3. Those with rank remaining remote and detached

The third category involves (also shown in Figure 7-1) a group or individual who are/is outside the executive group, but whose influence is

felt inside it. In this situation, one or more members of the group consider they require certain resources that a powerful group or individual outside the group control, but the resources are not forthcoming. At the same time, group members feel the powerful individuals outside are indifferent and dismissive of their need. Examples of the statements that group members might make in this situation are listed below. Accompanying these statements are usually tones of frustration or resignation. Below are examples.

“They said they would get back to us about our budget request, but not a word. The silence is deafening.”

“It was confusing. They asked for our proposal but gave so little time for discussion, and almost no feedback.”

“The delays in Head Office returning our emails are huge. We will ground to a halt if we don’t hear soon. The whole thing seems of no consequence to them.”

“I explained the obstacles to completing on time, but we’ve had no response for weeks.”

While one can’t be sure about the intentions of those the group are speaking about, what does emerge is that when those in the group conclude that those with rank or capital outside the group, on whom the group are relying on for something, are experienced as remote, detached or somehow dismissive to the needs of the group, negative affect emerges. It is proposed that those with rank, apart from the possibility of exercising economic power to obstruct resources, are also experienced as exercising the symbolic power of removing themselves from the frustrations of the group. Their privileged position enables them to do so, and they are doing this without any apparent acknowledgement they are drawing on their elevated rank to achieve it. If Mindell was right, it is the accessing of this privilege without awareness or acknowledgement that can be a major point of upset for a set.

Interestingly, Bourdieu in his own research into the French bourgeoisie, who possessed significant privilege through their economic, cultural and social capital, echoed this third cluster. He described them as “distant, detached or (with) a casual disposition towards the world or other people”, as described by Brubaker (1985).

In terms of applying Lukes’ model to this category, it is the response of the set that will determine which dimension of power was being exercised, and the ultimate impact on the generation of undiscussables. When the set openly raises their concerns with the powerful about their remoteness and lack of involvement, one-dimensional power had been exercised and

undiscussables minimised. Where the set does not do so, but rather speak only to each other about their frustration, covert conflict is generated, two-dimensional power has been exercised and undiscussables generated. In that case at least one undiscussable topic between the set and the powerful is the set's experience of feeling dismissed.

There does exist a third possibility, and one which, I would contend, is not uncommon. Here, the set might become accustomed, even socialised to expect those with power to remain remote and unresponsive to their needs, and may be entirely resigned to this scenario. In such a scenario, conflict will remain latent, and according to Lukes' conceptions, three-dimensional power has been exercised. An undiscussable topic for the set that relates to the behaviour of those with rank outside it might exist, but the set may be unaware of it. These are the features that characterise the use of three-dimensional power.

Figure 7-1 serves as a graphic summary of the previous discussion where the relationship between power and undiscussables is shown, with the exercise of two- and three-dimensional power creating them. In the bottom part of the diagram, it is suggested that continued use of one-dimensional power may ultimately become two-dimensional, where resistance becomes covert and undiscussables prevalent. Likewise, continued exercise of two-dimensional power may ultimately transform into three-dimensional power, where resignation, acceptance and latent conflict are present. In this case, undiscussables may be prevalent but elusive.

Implications on HRD

As has been noted elsewhere (Fenwick 2001; Fenwick 2010), current practice of HR has been accused of back-grounding its role in ensuring the workplace becomes more humane, in preference to its role in assisting organisational goals be realised. As an extension of that, HR, and AL as a tool of HR, has also been described as utilising a series of practices that bypass issues of power (Fenwick 2010). My own long-term experience as an organisational development consultant is that HR as a profession has to date been primarily interested in justifying, then continuing to prove its right to be at "the senior team table". It is often assumed that, to achieve legitimacy, the HR professional must evidence a contribution to the agreed business strategy, or present attractive cost savings. Associated with this is a subtle lack of confidence that may characterise the HR profession. My own unpublished doctorate thesis (Donovan 2014) included a review of a popular Web-based learning centre for HR professionals where videoed

interviews of interest were shown. The predominant rhetoric in the most viewed videos was clearly that described above. That is, it was advocated that the best way for HR professionals to respond to the ongoing question of legitimacy is to show clear contribution to strategy and/or produce significant cost savings.

The dilemma regarding establishment of credibility for HR is, however, a tricky matter. It implies meeting some standard and that, in doing so, membership is granted. But the problem is that the group to which one is striving to belong determines that standard, and that standard is usually premised on maintaining things as they mostly are. When this becomes the main goal of HR, it loses its power to offer a disruptive, provocative presence at the executive table. This may be particularly problematic in relation to business strategy. For many businesses, the CEO's strategy is premised on what will provide maximum growth, minimum costs, and the highest profit. As many have pointed out, when business makes preeminent such short-term goals, it is dangerous for the wider community. HR, however, may be in a unique position to advocate for a wider, more humane position in relation to business strategy.

In the context of the research presented in this chapter, an alternate role of HR is here proposed. In particular it is be the facilitator who supports "edgy" conversations within the senior executive group, and throughout the organisation, where the status quo is deeply challenged.

The skilled facilitation of executive and managerial teams, where small groups meet to address important concerns to them and the organisation, and engage in learning as they do so, may represent a positive, even powerful contribution by HR. Such facilitation, however, is no small task. Required, among other things, is the ability to understand the exercise of power and how they may work to reproduce relations that support withholding. That is, existing relations may (perhaps even are likely to) work to resist open, explorative conversation where assumptions can be tested, especially in connection to existing power relations. In that case, the rhythms of usual meeting conversation preserve themselves and shape conversations such that threatening or potentially embarrassing topics remain beyond the scope of the meeting. Skilled facilitation, however, remains a useful response to these dilemmas, but alas is often not provided. This lack of provision is the very gap to which it is proposed that HR bring a new and required expertise, and in doing so, add enormous value. The facilitation of such meetings represents a new powerful role for HR professionals, and the challenge in doing so is significant. To do so, HR professionals will need to be less concerned with "getting a seat at the table" and more concerned with disrupting the conversations at the table.

While working to establish credibility with their senior executive peers in terms that those peers define, HR diminish their ability to play a powerful disrupting role by facilitating conversations that unearth prevailing assumptions and help the group to say the unsaid.

Therefore, the challenge presented here is that those individuals who currently find themselves in senior HR roles might avail themselves of the relevant research and, trained by it, respectfully challenge the power relations which actively shape the project-oriented and financially biased conversations which dominate senior executive groups. This chapter then proceeded to describe three specific conversational manoeuvres that senior executive leaders and others may engage at the very time when wide and potentially disruptive conversations are bypassed, and so may be a helpful tool for HR professionals considering this new role. If not HR leadership, then who?

It should be included here that there does exist an obvious risk to such a role. HR professionals seen to be too “counter” to existing business practice may be further marginalised, and if so, lose their voice at the “table” and in the corridors where so many resources are allocated. To ameliorate this risk, dedicated skill practice is required. That does not remove the risk altogether, but may create a long and sustainable role for HR professionals in years to come.

Conclusions

It is now understood that the work of planning and learning for which executive groups are charged is centrally located in contested territory, where uncertainty is present and anxiety is provoked. Consequently, the work of leading AL sets is not for the faint-hearted. The growing area of research called CAL has made the power relations of such groups of central concern, and underlined the requirement of them to authentically include issues of politics and power connected to the changes they are striving to achieve. In the spirit of CAL, this chapter focuses on those within those groups who possess cultural capital, or rank, and three ways they may be tempted to draw on their rank to subtly control conversation to somehow lessen their discomfort or prevent an approaching vulnerability. At the same time, group members have become so socialised to the demands of their leaders, they may barely know power has been applied and fail to challenge the legitimacy of the demands. This pattern leads ultimately to the generation of undiscussables within these groups, and their far-reaching unwanted consequences.

While the chapter intends to show how leaders, when they forget their rank, can speak in ways that support the generation of undiscussables and its associated mediocre management, it also could be argued that group members, whose forgetting lulls them into unquestioning deference, then covert frustration, unwittingly supports this unwanted dynamic. The responsibility of executive and managerial group leaders is to consider how they may be accessing their privilege to protect their vulnerability.

In that context, a new and challenging role for HR professionals is advocated. Rather than striving for legitimacy on the grounds defined by those already at the executive table, HR professionals are urged to take a disrupting, even destabilising role as skilled facilitators who respectfully unearth untested assumptions, reshape power relations, and support more effective executive and managerial stewardship.

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