

Case Study

CRITICAL INCIDENT INTERVENTION and CHANGE RESILIENCE/TEAM-REBUILDING/ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A federal government division grappling destructively with the profound and emotionally frightening impact of the invading digital revolution becomes caught up in extremely hazardous (and potentially lawsuit costly) racial, professional, and demographic divisions. A critical incident intervention, stress resilience, change management, and team building process is illustrated and outlined, one that likely saved lives and/or careers and considerable federal monies, while rebuilding a seriously damaged work team culture and structure.

Prologue

It was twenty-years ago today/Sgt. Pepper taught the band to play... as the Beatles declared fifty-years ago. Well, as I recently was reminded, it was twenty years ago that I was asked to intervene in a technology-driven reorganization, a reorg that was quickly escalating into a dangerously volatile racial, gender, and generational maelstrom. The fresh reminder of its significance came from the Director, Client Service & Resolution Division, Office of Civil Rights, Office of the Secretary, U.S. Department of Commerce. This memory jog occurred as I was leading a one-day "Cross-Cultural Diversity" offering to DoC employees. This Administrator was amazed when I began to share about the afore-mentioned potentially explosive situation. As it turned out, I proved to be the answer to an "Organizational Folklore" mystery. (The Director was also pleased about my present work: "To say that you sent us a 'substitute' would minimize the amazing work done by Mark Gorkin, aka, the Stress Doc. In the early 90's, I became familiar with Mark's work with the former NOAA Mapping Division. It was wonderful to finally meet him and observe as he skillfully encouraged this group's engagement in this topic.")

At the time of the past intervention, the present Director was early in her career at Commerce. She had heard about "the rumblings in the basement" involving the former National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Reproductive Division, Office of Aeronautical Charting and Cartography. Over the years, the current Director had wondered how this time bomb situation was defused. In fact, she later shared that the disruption was so serious that future critical incidents at Commerce were labeled "Mapping Room" scenarios. So, two decades later, I received further confirmation of the impact of this intervention. (In addition, I've pasted below the testimonial received in Sep 1998 from the HR Transition Projects Manager. Not surprisingly, it leaves out most of the "Case Study" details which are outlined below.)

Challenges

In the mid-90s, the demographic make-up of the cartographers in the Reproductive Division was predominantly middle-aged white male. These individuals had painstakingly developed this exquisitely detailed skill of drawing aerial maps and charts by hand. A critical mission to this day. But a digital revolution was rapidly encroaching (perhaps invading is a more apt term), that would dismantle if not demolish countless numbers of professions, departments, and

organizations. And the people caught up in this relentless juggernaut would often be at the forefront of not just the job security/career battlefield, but on the front lines of an existential one as well. And none were more precariously positioned than these often battle-hardened, if not grizzled, government mapmakers.

In addition to vanguard technology threatening livelihood and person-hood, a demographic-generational sea change was underway. In underrepresented fields such as cartography, the Federal Government was hiring qualified minorities and women. Not surprisingly, this younger generation was more tech savvy than their mapmaking seniors. And, finally, in light of all the questions surrounding the future utility of manual cartography, the Reproductive Division was summarily moved from a fairly modern suburban federal government campus (NOAA) to the dark dank basement of the Dept. of Commerce. *Talk about adding insult to uncertainty!*

The convergence of techno-cultural revolution, social-cultural change, and physical geographical displacement was creating a perfect hazardous workplace storm. And the Division Management did not know how to weather this workplace battle zone, especially when one side is suddenly pulling up KKK websites and the other flank is bringing in Louis Farrakhan audiotapes. In addition to the fear of violent eruption, a stream of workplace grievance procedures was gaining force. The horizon seemed poised to hemorrhage both federal blood and money!

In the midst of this dangerously chaotic situation, an external Project Manager informed Reproductive Division management of an outside intervention resource. *Cue the Stress Doc!*

Actions

1. Assessment and Initial Trust-Building Meeting. The first action step was an intense meeting involving Reproductive Executives, Managers, and Supervisors, a few employees reflecting the partisan divisions, the Project Manager and myself. Mostly, I listened to considerable emotionally charged sharing and asked many questions. This approach helped confirm my suspicions: first, that a series of highly disruptive and disorienting events was ratcheting up stress levels for all parties; second, that the shock of techno-social culture change had regressed into fear and doubt, scapegoating and counter-aggression; and, finally, that no one really understood the importance of engaging in a division-wide grief process to: a) acknowledge multiple levels of vulnerability, especially for the senior mapmakers, b) recognize newcomer feelings of rejection and alienation, c) defuse scapegoating, provocative behaviors, and an overall hazardous climate, d) disassemble the current cultural communicational and empathy barriers, and e) help management regain their leadership role and presence to deal with organizational change, work performance, evaluation, and support issues, and f) rebuild healthy communication, collaboration, and team support structures. Attributing the tension more to shock and sense of loss in a rapidly changing/challenging work environment than to “angry, disgruntled, or bad folks,” reduced some of the defensiveness in the room. Both sides, as well as the employee’s union representative struggling to reconcile his own “uncivil war,” were willing to give me an intervention green light. *We were all dealing with complex cultural diversity conflict before there was even a buzzword!*

2. Operational Plan. The planning team agreed to two one-day “Stress and Anger/Conflict Management” Workshops. The sixty-person division would be divided in half, making sure each

workshop contained a diverse mix of race, senior and junior employees regarding age and experience, as well as gender. The workshops were held a couple of days apart (enabling me to lick my wounds... No, just kidding.) The committee would meet again, post-workshops, to evaluate the impact of the sessions and decide on necessary next steps.

3. Implementing the Plan.

a) Three “B” Exercise. I will forego most of the group process details, though will try to capture succinctly the conceptual and applied interactive methods and strategies used to engage the participants. Sharing previous work history, especially having been a “Stress & Violence Prevention Consultant” for another federal government agency – *the U.S. Postal Service* – gave me some “street cred” (and also generated some tension-breaking laughter). Almost immediately I had folks break up into groups of four for my “3 ‘B’ Stress Barometer Exercise: *How does your “Brain, Body & Behavior” let you know when you are under more STRESS than usual?*” On this issue, everyone could relate and share; instead of divisiveness we began with a meaningful and unifying experience. (The sharing also brought out some knowing laughter, as in, “You have that problem, too?”)

b) Stages of Burnout. We next focused on how prolonged stress and tension can lead to exhaustion, shame and doubt, frustration and aggression, cynicism and callousness and, even, helplessness and depression, that is, we reviewed my model of “The Four Stages of Burnout.” Believe me, this material generated enrapt attention. Again, breaking up the large group into smaller units, participants discussed where they were related to the burnout stages. After ten minutes or so, each group reported back to the room. This then became the platform for prolonged initial venting from all sides of a range of emotions.

c) Grief Work and Empathy. The foundation of this successful intervention was helping everyone understand the grief process – *from shock and sadness to rage, helplessness, and feeling abandoned to feeling out of control and fearful* – and their role in it. This was a complex challenge as powerful losses were simultaneously occurring on cross-cultural as well as individual, group, and organizational levels. Of course, there were the senior mapmakers, dealing with the potential loss of job security to “outsiders,” a collegial network, and a familiar home base. These men were feeling abandoned by the agency for whom they had loyally served. Equally profound, these experienced mapmakers needed to acknowledge the loss of their sense of professional and personal identity. There was an air of existential crisis.

Individual and collective anger was also heightened by uncertainty around the fate of the division, in light of all the technical, personnel, and organizational changes. They felt like pawns in this new digital game. Being able to talk openly about and sort out all the losses and fears would be essential if we were to eventually shift their scapegoat anger away from the interlopers. At the same time, it was critical for these newer employees to appreciate the scope and depth of senior loss and upheaval. Then, perhaps, there could be some acknowledgement of the fact that these junior colleagues were feeling like they had been stranded on Jurassic Park...and the dinosaurs weren’t too happy about the uninvited company!

d) Using Dynamic Exercises for Psycho-dramatic and Art Therapeutic Effect. Three exercises especially helped us slowly then, more purposefully, evolve through the

grief/ventilation stage into some aggression-reduction, empathy enhancement, and initial problem-solving.

Power Struggle Exercise. First, a “You Can’t Make Me/Oh, Yes I Can” Power Struggle Exercise. Two people are paired as adversaries engaged in a confrontation, each calling out one side of the refrain while contemplating a noxious individual from their past or present. The exercise, predictably, had a paradoxical effect. It’s scripted and improvisational structure encouraged both specific and spontaneous “anger” along with somewhat outrageous yet safe (and even absurdly playful) aggression. Actually, while most folks felt energized, some were a bit intimidated. (During this exercise, the body language, facial gestures, vocal intonations and exaggerations, and laughter are a sight and sound to behold.) This mini-psychodrama also highlighted the intensity of emotion and feelings of rage and/or helplessness when we are being pushed and pulled by people/forces beyond our control. Clearly, the exercise paralleled what most were feeling. From out of these aggressive ashes emerged a deeper sense of understanding and empathy for fellow colleagues despite cultural – racial, generational, technical, and gender – differences. And the post-exercise debrief provides diverse individuals further opportunity to share their personal (grief) stories. This invariably stimulates other individual and group sharing and some deeper common identification despite surface antagonisms and role-cultural-demographic divisions.

3 “D” Exercise. The second exercise was the Stress Doc’s “Three ‘D’ – *Discussion-Drawing-Diversity* – Problem Identification, Stress Resilience, and Team Building Exercise.” To prearranged diverse small groups comprised of seniors and juniors, white and black, men and women, a critical question is posed: *what are the sources or causes of stress, anger, and conflict during this turbulent transition?* The groups have ten-minutes to discuss the question; then, in the same time frame, they have to come up with a group image, stress logo, or storyboard that pulls together the points of their discussion. (Colored markers and large sheets of flip-chart paper are provided.) Trust me, these discussion-drawing groups channel frustration and fear into out-*rage*-ous imagery and surface real honesty. As a battalion commander once testified: *Mark, the pictures (from the drawing exercise) gave me more information about what’s going on in the trenches than all the reports that come across my desk!*

Next comes show and tell. Having a group spokesperson discuss the image with the entire audience not only furthers the chance for out-*rage*-ous ventilation/creative expression but helps the different groups, in toto, appreciate the similar group themes despite the varying images and stories. Also, worth noting, the use of visual imagery often helps individuals who are normally shy or uncomfortable with emotional expression to become more *art-iculate!*

Finally, the exercise can be a treasure trove of right- and left brained data. I often hear that the exercise challenged folks to utilize different problem-solving parts of their brain; groups invariably acknowledge a sense of creativity and more. The free-flowing idea generation and communication allows for “synergy.” That is, with such a dynamic process the individual parts (especially when diverse parts/people) and the open if not somewhat passionate and even contentious relationship among the parts, is what enables *the whole to be greater than the sum of their parts*, the traditional definition of synergy. And, for me, the real magic is when these parts (even initially antagonistic ones) become partners.

Perhaps synergy can turn groups into diverse, creative, and collaborative teams! As John Dewey, educator and pragmatic philosopher, the father of American Public Education observed: *Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity. It instigates to invention and sets us to noting and contriving. Conflict is the sine qua non of reflection and ingenuity.*

The bottom line: *People who days before were almost literally at one another's throats are working together, purposefully and playfully sharing their common pain and passion, breaking down cultural barriers, transforming scary differences into more superficial ones.*

Problem-Solving Matrix Team. And as with the other exercises, this too became a platform for further sharing, problem-solving, and some reconciliation. Using their drawings for reference, two groups are paired as a matrix team to identify key “stressor cookers” and generate, if not solutions, then problem solving steps and strategies. (Having members play positive and negative problem-solving roles adds to the intensity and realistic nature of the exercise. Also, encouraging both realistic and out-*rage*-ous recommendations adds to the fun and creative potential.) Ultimately, like the drawings themselves, this follow-up task helps give voice to hidden agendas as well as obvious hurts. But instead of it becoming a “gripe session,” it transforms pain and frustration into purposeful and passionate possibility and community. Finally, all these “Get FIT – *Fun-Interactive-Thought-provoking* – exercises are laying the foundation for future diverse and collaborative team-building.

As a postscript, in addition to being “FIT,” what helped make the exercises so effective was a purposeful disclosure and risk-taking sequence – moving gradually from a relatively safe, low risk sharing to exercises that ask for more openness, inviting emotions about charged issues and vulnerability. And, large group debriefing contributes to the mutual identification and sense of safety. Collective trust and, despite our differences, “we’re all in the same boat,” understanding begins to build.

Outcomes: The “Near-Miraculous” Seven

1. Consultant as Tested and Trusted Guide. The first outcome must be a fairly rapid and solid connection between the consultant and all levels and diverse components in the organization. He or she must be seen both as impartial and impervious to being bullied, flattered, or bought, yet be open to acknowledging, with both head and heart, each person’s story. (My term for such a consultant role: “The Intimate Outsider.”) And, in this kind of critical incident situation, one must be able to engage productively with sudden interpersonal challenges and confrontations (to your expertise and ability to identify with all sides). As the former HR/Special Projects Manager noted: *(Mark) connected with the employees at this division in a way that enabled the team process to move forward with confidence. Mark’s ability to build trust was a key factor. I was also quite impressed with his versatility and ability to adapt to last minute changes in plans.*

2. Creating a Safe Atmosphere. As participants observe and come to trust in your capacity for handling anger, willingness to be confronted, even taunted, without losing your professional poise and purpose, without becoming judgmental or having to overcontrol the process, an employee arena for fair fighting and vulnerable sharing begins to emerge. Ultimately, the group

is evolving a TLC climate: *it becomes acceptable to bring “Tender Loving Criticism and Tough Loving Care”* to the sharing, learning, and culture-community rebuilding experience.

3. Reduction of Animosity, Elevation of Empathy. As the day progressed, through workshop leader role modeling and the opportunity for emotionally charged yet safe ventilation – that is, *for doing individual and group grief work* – aggression levels decreased. As both sides began to hear the pain, fear, and anger being expressed by their so-called antagonists, blame and scapegoating were gradually replaced with understanding; some empathy even emerged. All parties were better able to discuss and contemplate the impact of the digital revolution and demographic and technical diversity that was profoundly shaping the federal mapmaking field. Now emerging was a climate for collaborative problem-solving and conflict resolution. Recommendations from the Reproductive Division would be pushed up the chain of command.

4. Bottom Line Results. The most immediate, dramatic bottom-line results was that the growing stream of grievance filings stopped in their tracks. As the external Project Manager noted: You "saved the federal government hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars in grievance procedures."

5. Executive and Management Coaching. After the workshop, I met with supervisors and managers, helping them debrief from the recent hazardous and traumatic conditions. Perhaps the biggest takeaway was not waiting until a conflict situation turns into a dangerous crisis before aggressively reaching out for critical resources and reinforcements. Also, I provided some guidance to those in authority to be as transparent as possible during reorganizational uncertainty: say what you know; don't pretend to know when you don't; don't sugar coat possible "bad news"; when you don't know something important to your charges, pledge to work your hardest to get the best information available.

6. Follow-Up Team Building. One of the outcomes of the day-long workshops was consensus on the need for follow-up team building. A team process would solidify the nascent trust that had emerged along with healthy and productive communication channels between previous antagonistic groups. Then, more follow-up sharing between employees and management was needed to continue the mutual trust- and confidence-rebuilding process. Group meetings which had practically gone into hiding, were again being held. Now employees began taking more responsibility for contributing to team agendas and the meeting process.

7. Preparation for Reorganization. The de-escalation of violence and stoppage of grievance procedures along with renewed channels of interpersonal and team communication was patently critical. However, so too were the grief work process skills that individuals added to their stress resilience repertoire. People were better able to grapple with future job/role status uncertainty and began pushing administration to address these concerns. Division members were feeling less like pawns in the game; now folks believed they had some say, were a little more in control of future choices. In fact, the division was ultimately folded into a new digital technology unit. Many of the senior mapmakers took early buyouts.

Closing Summary

In truth, this was not a fairy-tale ending; a number of career tracks were ended, some prematurely. A highly skilled and storied profession was limping more than riding off into a

digital sunset. But by honestly and courageously: a) facing a complex array of organizational stress factors as well as intense and vulnerable emotions, b) engaging genuinely and courageously with frightening racial and other cultural differences, c) creating a safe immediate and follow-up atmosphere for grappling with hazardous conflict and uncertainty, and d) rebuilding team openness and trust, not only was a near disastrous scenario averted. In addition, impending costly legal battles disappeared. And from a human relations perspective, people and teams had gained skills and tools for more effectively managing loss and change; for regaining a professional sense of poise and purpose, even in times of powerful uncertainty; for realizing that healthy confrontation of difference can lead to creative collaboration and reconciliation. People were able to move on with new stress resilience muscles and a fortified sense of personal and professional direction and integrity. *Amen and women, to that!*

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SEP 21 1998

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Dear Greg:

I want to thank you for the work you have done with the Reproduction Division on our project on stress and conflict management. Thanks to your successful project management and expertise, the project evolved from introductory workshops for Reproduction Division employees on conflict management to stress management and team building.

In particular, I commend you on your selection of Mr. Mark Gorkin, LICSW, as facilitator for this project. His skills and expertise were critical to ensure the project's success. Mr. Gorkin's approach in the first workshops was so successful that we welcomed the opportunity to utilize his talents again for the team building project that followed. He connected with the employees at this division in a way that enabled the team process to move forward with confidence. Mark's ability to build trust was a key factor. I was also quite impressed with his versatility and ability to adapt to last minute changes in plans. I would highly recommend Mark's services for future projects.

I am sorry that I will not be able to see this project to completion. I have accepted a position at the Department of Transportation and will be leaving NOAA. You have provided invaluable resources for AC&C, and it is my hope that AC&C will continue to make use of your services. Again, I express my appreciation for the opportunity to have worked with you. I hope our

professional paths will cross again.

Sincerely,

Melissa A. Hartman  
Special Projects Manager  
Reproduction Division, AC&C

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