

Working in the Cracks – Fractures or Wellbeing

Angela Eden, Associate Consultant, Cass CCE

As we know, organisations are managing an increasingly complex set of relationships, policies and procedures. In addition, there are guidelines, regulations, structures and frameworks within which we work. It can feel like this architecture is a distraction from what we call the “real work”. As people struggle with that tension there is a chance of the tension turning to stress, and the stress highlighting a fault in the system. It is these “faults” or “cracks” I would like to focus on as I am increasingly asked to work with complex inter-personal and potentially traumatic situations, for both the individual and the organisation.

For me, this idea became clearer when I visited an exhibition at the Tate Modern gallery in London; it was a construction by Doris Salcedo, a crack in the floor of the turbine hall. This gash started as a small crack, widened, split and moved across the long stretch of space.

“She invited us to look down into it, and to confront discomfiting truths about our world. As you look in you can get the feeling of catastrophe in there but nonetheless outside it is quite subtle” (taken from the Tate Modern's website).

I found the concept, and the concrete reality, an important metaphor to understand about work in organisations. I realised that a small crack in any system can develop a huge significance as it spreads into the rest of the organisation. Any organisation wants to look a “smooth” operation, yet a small crack has the potential to fracture the structures and processes that are its foundations. Inevitably we want to avoid the pain of upheaval and increasing instability. So most organisations look at indicators to check the solidity of their system; indicators such as sickness and absentee figures, the numbers of Disciplinary or Tribunal hearings, staff retention etc. I am suggesting that it may also be useful to look at other indicators; the conflicts, tensions, and even casualties we work with.

This raises the question I want to address, about the way we work with those cracks. We have the choice to paper over them, for fear of exposing the fault lines which may fragment the whole (A). We also have the choice to look at the crack and see what it tells us about the systems we work in (B). Sometimes the crack may be the beginning of a fracture and maybe that break is helpful in moving away from the past.

Organisation A

This scenario was a sub branch of a large international organisation. The office was run in line with the “parent” company way of working. A local office, in a different country, had values and ways of working more in line with their local culture. It was well respected locally and there were always local people who wanted to work there; the head of the office was well known in the area. I was asked to investigate a series of complaints about lack of promotion and inequality in the recognition people gained. I conducted a set of diagnostic interviews and formulated a series of actions that

might minimise the “grumbling”. I had a sense, when I presented my ideas, that little would happen. There was too much invested in the senior manager, and too many local politics in the mix. My report was accepted with great politeness but the office culture did not change.

Organisation B

A single-service organisation was amalgamated with another organisation to provide a wider range of services for a varied and vulnerable client group. This meant that two teams came together, with two different ethos and cultures made up of staff with different backgrounds, experiences and skills.

A key function was Reception and Office Administration. Before the merger, the office had had a fixed set of procedures and a few local clients coming in to the office. After the merger, there were more workers, more demands on the administration and many more vulnerable clients using the Centre.

Reception was clearly a lynch pin of the service and the post was given to an untrained clerical team member. She tried to manage the new way of working but found it difficult to change her style, despite supervision and training. Everyone in the office became stressed and she became increasingly “clumsy” in her response. I was asked to mediate between her, the manager and the head of the team. Their relationships had become more acrimonious and more personal; threats of grievances and resignation made the atmosphere intolerable. During the work it became obvious that the receptionist was in the wrong job and that it was in management hands to move her to a job better suited to her skills. It meant a long process of performance appraisal, a divergent approach to manage anger and disappointment.

Summary

I am offering these reflections as I think it is important to be courageous and get into those cracks and ask ourselves what they mean. If we found a crack in a physical building, we would ask a surveyor to check the foundations. If the structure was weak, we would reinforce it. If the crack were superficial, we would re-plaster.

So following Doris Salcedo I too am being provocative. I am asking if the temptation of a short term fix is a denial of the possible fault line; or do we have the skills and the confidence and support to work in the crack and find a creative, healthier outcome?

If you would like to respond to the issues raised in this article please contact
barbara.robertson.1@city.ac.uk

About Angela

Angela’s career has a consistent theme of working across the boundary between communities of interest. She started her career in education, moved to community development, management training and currently works with organisations. She trained in Social policy (London School of Economics) Organisation Consultancy (Tavistock), and as a Mediator (School of Psychotherapy and Counselling).

Her Organisation consultancy practice is focussed on improving communication between different groups in the structure, personal role consultation, and wider systemic issues.

She researches and writes about leadership, mediation and coaching.