

WORLDWORK IN THE CORPORATE WORLD: A CASE DESCRIPTION

EUROPE AND CARRIBEANS – CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN A GLOBAL 500 COMPANY

Max Schupbach Ph.D.

What follows are some highlights of the theory and methodology required for an understanding of the case descriptions. For more on the terms and concepts, please read the introduction Worldwork – Transformation in Organizations, Communities, Business And The Public Space.

According to the Worldwork paradigm, a group can be viewed as being structured by an **organizing principle**, a **field**. The field distributes the various different polarities, or positions in the group. As facilitators, in order to make these positions more visible, we can make **roles** out of them. Think of it as a group of people, who are being directed by an invisible director, something like a group mind, to perform a play.

Roles can be further differentiated into **roles** and **ghost roles**. **Roles** are positions that belong to the central belief system of the culture or group, and thereby are generally accepted within the group. They can be voiced without creating a strong group reaction. In contrast, **ghost roles** are behaviors that we cannot voice, because they are not “acceptable” within a given organizational culture. Although they are not made explicit, everyone feels their presence and suffers from them.

Ghost roles can also be detected in the unintended communication. Roles and ghost roles create some sort of a shadow play together, or relate to one another on a dream level. When we talk about what ‘really’ goes on in a group, opposite to what was being said on the surface, we are in the realm of the interaction of roles and ghost roles. The roles speak the polite or appropriate sentences, but we hear the whispers of the ghostroles in the insinuations and implicit statements.

One reason that groups often avoid changing levels, making unintended communication explicit, or giving voice to the ghost roles, is the fear that the consequences will be irresolvable. From a Worldwork perspective, this makes sense. Roles and ghost roles are non-local in the sense that they really belong to the group as a whole, meaning everyone. This is why if a person who has taken an unpopular role leaves an organization, someone else will often pick up these roles. Although ghost roles are most often spotted in the opposing group, they are also present in one’s own group, but remain marginalized there. This is one of the reasons, why it often takes an emotional interaction to understand fully how these roles are present in one’s own group. The only resolution in that sense is a raised awareness, of how we are the other. No wonder we shy away from direct confrontations.

Background

In this case description, you can read the report of a group process among the executive management of a Global 500 corporation. Global 500 is a list of the 500 largest companies worldwide. This group has a global presence, and its headquarters are in the United States. It is especially extensively represented in Europe, and has worldwide branches in a variety of different business areas. We are two external consultants, facilitating an annual strategy retreat with the executive management. The group consists of 50 to 60 people. Over half are top senior executives, the remaining 20 plus are experts from various levels of the organization and from countries from all over the world, who for different reasons were invited to join the retreat.

It's the third year that we facilitate these retreats. They address many issues and are meant to result in a common vision and program of how to conduct their affairs in the coming year. Although the main focus is on general strategy development, many group members are also interested in working out team issues when they come up, or resolve relationship issues, if they are seen as a hindrance to the organizational efficiency. Frequently smaller organizational problem spots are included in the agenda, if they are seen not only as a local issue, but also as a possible learning source for a company wide development.

Opening Scene:

We are in day two of the meeting. This afternoon, the whole group meets. Tomorrow morning, the group plans up to break into various subgroups on specific topics. The focus of this afternoon is the development and progress of the new branch of one of the corporation's production groups in the Caribbean, the first one for this product line in this part of the world. The gossip during the break was that there had been many problems, and that the meeting was meant as an opportunity to bury the project.

The project leader, a woman named Brigitte, opens with a report, summarized as follows:

'We have come across some problems so far. There were problems within the supply chain of the builders. Some materials got lost, vanished, or were the wrong kind. In addition, there were some personnel problems. Workers either didn't appear when they were supposed to, or walked out on their jobs. We had to hire non-skilled workers to meet one deadline, which resulted in additional problems, setting us even further behind. The communication between the corporate project management and the local team is often complicated. But we think we can overcome the problems with a renewed effort.'

Brigitte, while trying to act in control, sounds frustrated and angry, looking down at her report and avoiding everybody's eyes.

Alonzo, the team leader of the Caribbean team, now speaks up. What follows is a summary of what he said:

'Yes, there have been difficulties. We don't have the necessary infrastructure yet in place. It's sometimes difficult to find some of the materials that we need – sometimes they are not available. Also, we were slowed down by extreme weather conditions. But we are doing our best and we will finish the project as close to the deadline as possible. I am sure we can work out the differences.'

Alonzo sounds very cold and detached, as if he were talking about someone else. He too, avoids looking at anyone. The atmosphere is tense.

There is some questioning back and forth by other executives, during which time both parties basically repeat their position. Several of the leading executives are now nodding their heads, indicating they understand, but their facial expressions are skeptical and non-committal. One of them suggests giving the project one more month, after which a decision will be made on how to continue. Several people agree and the group seems ready to move on to the next topic. The group atmosphere feels stale and somewhat depressed.

Analysis

The two sides have stated their initial positions, which were already known to them. Both have transmitted both intended communications and unintended communications, or double signals.

On a “measurable” level, or consensus reality, there is the content of the communication, which signals a mutual understanding of the problems, and an agreement to keep trying. Both sides have a tacit agreement, which prefers rational linear reporting, similar to reading the contents of a shopping list, and the suppression of the open conflict that can be felt in the atmosphere and that is expressed in tone of voice and body language.

On a self-organizing level, or dreaming level, the ghost roles are found in unintended and often non-verbal communication, in this case the suppressed aggression, and the general group atmosphere of depression at the end. The reason we call this self-organizing is because these signals cannot be consciously controlled or organized; they “leak” out of the intended message. The escalation is seen in the frustration, tone of voice and facial expressions. What is being postponed is not so much the decision, but the escalation in the non-verbal communication.

From one viewpoint, often named democratic-humanistic, you can argue that the headquarters, with their predominantly European and American thinking style, needs to open up to diversity and accept the different cultural values of the Caribbean crew, and learn how to work with them. From another viewpoint, often called organizational viability, or corporate strategy, you might argue that it is time to cancel the project, as it is costing too much, and endangering the competitiveness of the entire organization.

These viewpoints are only the tip of the iceberg. Behind them are cultural differences and unresolved issues of the Zeitgeist, the time spirits, and include issues of the corporate culture, and issues of the development of the globalization process. From the democratic-humanistic viewpoint, for example, the success or failure of globalization depends on relating to the different cultural style in other areas of the world, in order for other cultures to be accepted. If that doesn't happen, there will be no sustainable resolutions, but rather more and more revolt and rebellion. From the viewpoint of organizational survival, the corporate viability is threatened in a competitive world. If there is no organization left, there will be no people with jobs with whom to discuss the democratic values with, so they argue. From a Worldwork perspective, both of these partial realities are parallel worlds and both must be correct and complementary, since they are

*part of the same field. Together with additional viewpoints and parallel worlds, they represent the entire reality. If we introduce **Deep Democracy**, a concept that can work with these polarities and that can give voice to the unintended communication, we can hope that as much information as possible becomes accessible to the organization as a whole. The potential crisis is not a problem, but rather an attempt of the system to balance itself. The facilitator's job is to create the boundary conditions within which that can happen safely.*

Intervention: To help either side to go over the edge and represent the ghost role, in this case the positions that are politically incorrect.

Voicing The Ghost role: Deep Democracy Beyond Political Correctness

One of the facilitator starts out on the headquarters' side, and gets permission to voice a ghost role, after reassuring the other side, that she will be on their side in a moment. The facilitator says:

'If I were part of the headquarters, I would think: This is not going anywhere. It was a mistake in the first place - we will have the same problem with the plant on a continuous basis. Let's abort the whole operation. They are not developed and educated enough, and too flakey, and don't see the opportunity that we offer them. Let's build in a place where we will have less of these problems. I can't say that out loud, or we will have a big row in here, because everyone will be insulted.'

Some people in the headquarters actually smile, and one person unconsciously nods a little when they hear that spelled out. Others protest, no, they would never think something like this. Interestingly enough, one of the Caribbean team members smiles also and looks relieved. The other one looks upset and furious.

***Analysis:** One side has gone over the edge, has said the "politically incorrect" statement. Now comes the facilitation of the response of the other side.*

The Caribbean team leader first answers rationally, repeating that the team does its best. The smile as well as the upset-ness is a ghost role that needs to be unfolded.

The facilitator inquires first about the smile. The person says right away, that it is a relief to hear it spoken out loud. She says, she often feels this attitude when she interacts with that group, but it's never said out loud. The facilitator understands that as good feedback to continuing the direct expression. The facilitator gets permission to voice the ghost role for the Caribbean team. He says:

'If I were you, I would think the following: they never understood us. They are arrogant and greedy, and instead of helping us to get

this done, they constantly criticize us and look down at us. Obviously they have no clue about who we are.'

'Yes!' passionately chimes in now one of the Caribbean knowledge workers. 'They always treat us as if we were stupid and lazy.' And turning to the American project leader:

'You seem to think that if we were not constantly supervised, we would all take off and go to the beach for the day.'

The atmosphere has changed. It is now electric and everybody looks awake and present.

Analysis: This is an escalation with mutual reproaches. Both sides have escalated and broken the usual communication style and state of mind of the group. It is up to the facilitator, to frame this and make it a safe environment in which to find a sustainable outcome. First, the group needs to be supported in having gone over the edge, or allowed change in.

The facilitator frames the change. She says:

'Congratulations, you are both impressive; this is the first step for the resolution. Notice how powerful you both have become. It's this power that will solve the problems, not only the politeness that I sensed before. It's this power that you now both display, which is going to finish the project.

Both sides breathe a little easier.

The respective parts that are being criticized are both ghost roles, positions that no one can identify with. Because no one identifies with these positions, we cannot find the information behind them, and only look at them judgmentally. In order to transcend this, we need to pass through the emotional non-linear process that we are now in, and to get to the actual essence of these roles. Look at how these sides appear to each other

***The headquarters' side:** an arrogant inflated western mindset, that thinks it can do everything better, faster, and more intelligently, and that is cold, mechanistic, unrelated, greedy and ignorant..*

***The Caribbean team's side:** a lazy, sabotaging, ignorant undeveloped person, who lives in fantasyland and doesn't get that problems need to be solved materially.*

The intervention is to help each side to identify with some aspects of the accusation, so that the actual processes behind the stereotypes can be found.. This is a complex matter, in which the facilitator often can use her own elder and leadership. Read the shortened version of how it continued:

Ghost Role and Role Switch:

The facilitator points out that most accusations hold a bit of truth, and that by one side picking up the accusation first, they will help to create a sustainable outcome. Alonzo, the Caribbean team leader, looks at the facilitator, a signal indicating that he might want to try first. The facilitator picks up the cue and says:

‘Alonzo, maybe you want to try first, and I’ll assist, and then I’ll help the other side.’

Alonzo speaks:

‘Well it’s true; we have a different experience of time and life. For us, time is not a thing that can be wasted or used. Time allows us the opportunity to be and to live, to have relationships and to be with friends. Our lives are rich because of our experiences and bonds, and because of our joy, not because of the profits we make. We think that time and the freedom to spend it how we want is the most precious gift.’

At this point, very unexpectedly, one of the senior executives in the team on the other side, a Swede, suddenly says, ‘that actually sounds nice!’

Other members of his group look at their colleague disapprovingly.

This is a significant moment. Now, that one side is identifying with their part of their accusation, we witness the beginning of a role switch. The fact that one member on US/Euro side is actually affirming the role that is being played out on the Caribbean side, is the beginning of that group being able to identify with that role also. This is partially predictable. For reasons of self-balance, if one side picks up the accusation, the other side will tend to switch. The group doesn’t have to change as a whole. Noticing that the role is present among them is more important than unity.

Immediately the facilitator picks up the role switch and asks the Swede what he would do with more time. He responds:

‘I would take time and go to the ocean and leisurely rethink my projects and find a more creative approach to them..maybe with music.’

He laughs shyly, and says jokingly:

‘I most of the time am under such a time pressure from the outside, constantly chased by deadlines, that I never have enough time to really think about the new creative things I have on my mind.’

Many executives agree now, although some disagree. One says:

‘Yes, remember the time when Horst, (*another executive*) had broken his leg, and the good ideas that he had come back with after

his two weeks in the hospital.’ (*Everyone laughs*). He was a nicer person, too!! (*Everyone laughs harder*).

The human resource director, who had listened quietly to the conversation, says:

‘Actually, if we had more time, we would probably be more efficient and not less. That is what I hear us say’

The European and American subgroup has now entered a lively discussion about how to use time, and how to deal with time pressure. They have forgotten about the Caribbean people on the other side, who are watching the conversation with beaming faces. The subgroup decides to add a topic on time pressure, creativity and efficiency, and how to find the balance in the following day’s subgroup session. The leader of the Western/American group suggests that some of the Caribbean team join them for the meeting, as they might be helpful in this process. The Caribbean people smile proudly.

Analysis: The issues of time and how to use it, is now seen as a global issue, that is present on both sides. At this point, although with different conditions, the European/American group indicates that the interaction has added to their own learning. Time pressure and the impulse to escape it is no longer seen as an issue that is present in the Caribbean. Rather it is present everywhere. The Caribbean team started the de-escalation by admitting to some aspects of the reproach. This alone is such a strong experience, that it can be thought of as responsible for the change within the US/Western group.

Processes are self-balancing. The other side must also own part of the approach. Now we must assist the other side

The facilitator now asks the other side to identify with the approach. Brigitte, with some help, admits:

‘Yes, it’s true; I look down at many people, because they are not as efficient and intelligent as I am, and don’t see always where the possible value addition or profit lies.’

There is a sigh of relief on the Caribbean side and some disagreement everywhere in the room.

Analysis: It’s politically incorrect to own the experience of excellence and feeling better. Brigitte has stepped into a ghost role. It also needs to be unfolded. In the same way as lazy was a term for a different experience of time that is present and needed in both groups, arrogance also needs to be unfolded. The relief on the Caribbean side about the admission of the arrogance is no surprise for a worldworker. Contrary to common belief that the admission would cause outrage, the opposite occurs. The effect of the ghost role was always felt; now that it has a voice, we know we can process it.

The facilitator asks her how she knows this. She looks confused at first and then she says:

‘I feel it when I talk to people.’

I ask her to take time to actually feel it, and to identify with the feeling. As she does this, a smile suddenly appears on her face, and she says surprised:

‘It actually feels good. It has a feeling like crème brûlée, my favorite dessert. Soft and sweet, and a little tangy’

When asked more, she explains.

‘I have so much experience, have created projects on so many continents, I am very capable and organized, and by now I understand most of the problems that I come across. I feel proud and good about my knowledge.’

She looks embarrassed and when asked about this shyness, she replies that you are not supposed to feel good about yourself. There is a gleam on her face. The room had gone quiet. Many people look touched, and the Caribbean team leader suddenly bursts out:

‘I have experienced this, how experienced you are, and it’s so wonderful to see you talking about it now so openly.’

She looks surprised that he doesn’t criticize her, but actually admires her. She asks if it is not offensive to say that.

‘No,’

Alonzo replies,

‘on the contrary. You allow me to be proud of my work, too. We had many difficulties, but we did overcome so many, (and lists a few) and if it wasn’t for us starting this dialogue, we would have never gotten into a dialogue.’

Brigitte nods in agreement, and looks at him with relief and surprise. She says:

‘If I were more in touch with this sense of accomplishment, I probably would interfere more and speak out more about how to do things.’

Suddenly someone starts clapping. There is a great atmosphere in the room. Everyone feels the relief of the change of atmosphere. Both sides agree that there has been a mood shift, and appreciate the opening of the communication between them.

***Analysis:** the issue of arrogance is now seen also as global issue. Arrogance is a perverted expression of self-confidence and self-appreciation. Once it is owned, it*

opens the way to pride, leadership and eldership. Both sides are waking up to these connections and to see their own learning there.

The Resolution

An executive member now asks how this will affect the actual project, mentioning the shareholders who need to be considered.

Analysis: now that the information has been found that was hidden in the ghost roles, and the group has experienced a change in the previously governing state of mind, the consensus reality is back. The information now should bring forth a new solution for the problem.

The Caribbean people begin by saying that they can actually do better. One of the members for the first time admits that some of the delays might have been avoidable. A knowledge worker says, half jokingly, that maybe they were resisting. They state that they want to try harder, because they want and need the jobs:

‘We want to learn to work more efficiently and the plant will benefit all of us. We want to learn how to do this better, and we look forward to be trained in this area. If we talk like this to each other, we work 24 hours, it’s more fun than the beach!’

he adds with a mocking tone, referring to his earlier comment’

Now the role switch is done, one member is siding with the other side. The group decides to work the next day in their subgroup on what can be done to actually improve efficiency, and invites team members from the other group over to help. The project leader looks thrilled. She brings out her eldership by saying congruently and powerfully:

‘This has been an amazing learning session. I am grateful to the team for having brought out the importance of teamwork and relationship. I know we can finish this in time and I know it will be a great branch.’

There is a great sense of relief, a new feeling of closeness in the group, and hopefulness in the air.

Postscript:

The whole group process lasted a little under an hour. The participants later told us, that they considered it a highly successful meeting. Later they also told us, that the plant actually was finished in time. Two years later the corporation reported and celebrated a production record in its Caribbean branch. Although we didn’t believe into a single causal connection between the meeting and the outer success, we thought it should be mentioned here as part of the story.

Closing remarks:

This mini case description is meant to give you a general idea of how the paradigm can be applied in various groups. For any teamwork intervention like the one above to be effective, it needs an ongoing culture around it. The description omits many details and doesn't include the awareness process of the facilitator. It also neglects the preparation work and the debriefing work afterwards. Both teams were coached on line for a period of two months after the work. I refer you to other pages on this site or to the [library](#) link for more detailed descriptions of other cases.

I also inserted very brief theoretical analysis and explanation of the interventions in the description. I hope that this will help to explain both the application of Worldwork through interventions and some of the theory behind the applications. If you are unfamiliar with the terms used, you will find them explained in the [overview article](#).