Looking where the light is better

Exploring the ironies of organisational culture change

by Doug Reeler, Tamarind Tree Associates, 2022

The great Sufi master Mullah Nasruddin was on his hands and knees searching for something under a streetlamp. A man saw him and asked, "What are you looking for?" "My house key," Nasruddin replied. "I lost it." The man joined him in looking for the key, and after a period of fruitless searching, the man asked, "Are you sure you lost it around here?" Nasruddin replied, "Oh, I didn't lose it around here. I lost it over there, by my house." "Then why," the man asked, "are you looking for it over here?" "Because," Nasruddin said, "I am looking where the light is better."

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"It feels like it's not enough just talking about our culture." The team leader said, "We need some simple and practical projects to change it."

It is 2019 and there were ten of us in the Zoom meeting, all perched at our computers from as many countries on three continents. Eight were members of the Culture Change Team of a programme department of an international NGO, with my colleague and I there as consultants brought in to accompany them.

The task of this team was to lead initiatives in their department to help shift dysfunctional aspects of their culture to align with their values. This had been initiated after an internal culture survey of the whole organisation had revealed a range of unacceptable behaviours across the organisation, chiefly discrimination linked to race, gender and sexuality, bullying, work overload and burnout.

In the variety of Zoom backgrounds, we could glimpse a set of family pictures, bookshelves, a bed, a couch or a bicycle, a spare bed and even a garden. And now and then we might catch sight of a child popping into view to hang on the back of mum's chair to peer over her shoulder at us, all arranged in neat little windows. We were all bringing our homes to work, little bits of local culture in the background, and despite the disembodied video portraits floating in virtual remoteness, at times it was oddly intimate.

With the survey as sufficient evidence of a serious problem, a series of participative "culture dialogues" amongst staff had been envisaged that they intended would launch actions and initiatives to strengthen the positive and deal with the negative.

The team leader concluded wryly "Although, I suppose wanting projects to change our culture is our culture too." I was glad that the irony did not escape her, but still what she was saying would seem practical and sensible to the others and the "let's move to action" tone in her voice could energise the conversation. So, we waited to gather our thoughts and see what they might add. But nothing came and I took a deep breath, quickly shaping my response into questions:

"You are right. Culture change projects will be needed, but can you see that having better conversations are at the heart of the work of culture change? Consider how much of organisational life and working relationships happen in conversations? If, through these dialogues you can become more conscious of how you speak and listen to each other, and deal better with whatever issues you have, how much might that help you to change your culture, in real time?"

Actionable projects to improve systems, procedures and cultural rituals are vital, like gender sensitive work environments, equitable opportunities for advancement, the reduction of cumbersome bureaucracy, or celebrating achievements and birthdays etc. But, without a shift in the culture of conversation and the development of a common language to raise and deal with issues of culture, none of these projects would be enough.

What we were suggesting to them was that the dialogues between staff might not only produce good culture change ideas and projects but also model or help to reshape their *conversational culture*, the way they speak to each other, indeed the way they treat each other. This is what most of being an organisation is: conversation. Without conversation there can be no organisation.

And so, in our conversations we are doing organisation and in the quality of our conversation is reflected our culture.

A problem with the notion of 'culture'

I have been working with the idea of organisational culture and various practices of culture change for most of my professional career but until this point had entertained a variety of woolly interpretations of what culture is, none of which I was really satisfied with but lived with because, well, culture is a nebulous thing and so perhaps we have to live with a nebulous definition.

What could be a clearer idea of the notion, of what it is or at least what it is not and indeed whether it is always useful? Sue Davidoff cautions that

> *"'Culture' could sound like a 'thing' in an organisation, some 'thing' that we need to attend to. It covers many aspects of what happens in organisations, and in this way, calling them 'culture' can take away from the very alive and dynamic nature of what we are pointing to."* [1]

So, I have come to realise that culture is not some mysterious cloud that hovers between us but comes from *withinside* ourselves, continuously. Each one of us is implicate, each person is an agent of culture, either reproducing or changing it in what we say or do not say, what we do or do not do. We echo culture between us in our regular relationships and activities. It shows itself in unconscious messages we give each other about what is acceptable or not, often becoming habits that we re-model and reproduce through action or inaction, willingly or not.

The real danger is that we project a power onto culture in naming it as its own force, outside of ourselves, something we think we can change without changing ourselves. When it becomes all-encompassing then the concept can become useless or worse, anything to anyone, and thus disembodied from individual responsibility and agency.

What can this tell us about the origins and nature of culture issues, about what is culture or not?

In many organisations I have worked with people are afraid to speak up about abuse or poor management. Should we call that an issue of culture? Such a climate of fear may appear to be

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[1] In an email conversation

cultural, but the source can often be tracked to managers or leaders who perpetuate that fear to serve other ends, whether their own interests or of those interests or orders they represent from the hierarchy. Fear cascades through such organisations. This is precisely how hierarchies work. Calling that a culture issue may be a distraction from naming the problem for what it is: the exercising of dysfunctional, dominating power.

In many organisations, especially in business and government, this managerial power is taken as a given and the staff buckle under. But in this organisation of politically aware social change activists, hierarchical power is quickly experienced as bullying or manipulation. This is what the culture survey was saying to us.

The real work of culture change

But what is the real work of *culture change* conversations specifically? For us it is firstly about cultivating empathy through telling our stories. Empathy happens when we hear a well-told story that enables us to almost re-live what the teller went through, to see and feel what they experienced. It is an act of imagination, of walking in each other's shoes.

But it is not only that. There are three kinds of empathy that are needed for change to take place.

Personal stories help the listeners to *understand* the effects of their innuendos, their harsh tones, their biases, their inaction, their ignorance of the realities of those who are not like them, or their acceptance of systems that reproduce inequity. This is what is known as *cognitive empathy* to help people to recognise the consequences of unacceptable behaviours.

But painful stories, needing a safe and encouraging space to be told well, can also surface *emotional empathy*, that deepest of social impulses through which we experience our common humanity. This is surely the common basis for the culture of an organisation that professes to be human-centred: That with all our differences we are reminded that we are all equally worthy human beings, deserving of equal respect.

But even when we can understand the reason for someone's pain, and when we can feel their distress, how does this change anything? Indeed, if nothing really seems to change, the storyteller may have only become vulnerable in re-living their trauma, and the only result being a cynicism that it was not worth it, a common refrain in many organisations. *Active empathy* is also needed, where the will to actively change oneself and the situation is sparked in others, and something is done, an act of solidarity and change.

The capabilities for cognitive, emotional and active empathy are already in us, as potential, deeply embedded inside us as social beings[2]. We are thinking, feeling and willing beings[3], each of these vital dimensions to being conscious, connected and energetic in the world. The third dimension of active empathy, coming from out of the will, is often the most difficult to encourage, not because it is not there, but because it is so often buried or hampered by things like doubt, or self-doubt ("we have

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[2] We should say 'embedded in most of us' because this does not apply in organisations where there are disorders like narcissism and sociopathy, especially in leaders. In this organisation we have not detected these, but in some organisations where we have worked, where there are narcissistic or sociopathic leaders, we have seen devastating cultural consequences and where culture change initiatives are pointless, even counterproductive.

[3] Many of you will recognise these concepts as part of the Head-Heart-Feet archetype that we in the CDRA used in so many ways in our practice, a concept at the heart of an Anthroposophical practice as brought by Rudolph Steiner and later by Bernard Lievegoed in its application to organisation development.

tried before and nothing changed') and fear ("I will be punished if I rock the boat"). Underlying resentment, hatred and even self-hatred is also another brake on the will to change in many situations.

In this light, the call from the team leader for "some simple and practical projects" to change the culture came from that place of active empathy, and indeed this has been one of the most positive aspects of her leadership.

It should be mentioned that the work of this departmental team was only one if many initiatives in the wider organisation designed to shift the culture. A set of feminist principles was promoted in a variety of education workshops, to promote an understanding of what a safe and free, decolonized working environment should look like: free from racism, patriarchy and toxic masculinity and any form of gender violence, equitable, diverse, inclusive and caring.

Despite the results of the survey, our sense is that these qualities are not hard to find in this organisation. But they are not yet sufficiently pervasive. So, the work is to surface and to deepen empathy at each level.

Two phases of culture change

From our experience of dealing with the kinds of discrimination and bullying that had been revealed in the survey, we could see that two phases were required.

The first phase is by rupture, a calling of the crisis and a pausing to let the truth come out. The survey was the beginning of this to be followed by the dialogues, as processes of storytelling. The saying "once you have seen it you cannot unsee it" came up in several meetings as a key to the work.

Those who felt bullied or discriminated against needed to share their experiences with those who were responsible or had been silently complicit. Only this could foster the empathy that was needed for change. But if crudely done the trauma may simply be re-experienced, indeed it will always be, but will only be softened and resolved if deeply listened to and acknowledged with the promise of change to come. Then forgiveness and learning are possible, and a changed culture can begin to take root.

The second phase is a longer process, of more active and enduring empathy, to weave into the rhythm of the organisation some regular spaces to keep culture conversations alive amongst team colleagues, as a primary site of cultural experience, able to deal with new culture issues that emerge and out of which small and large changes could be prompted. Sustaining culture change means sustaining culture change conversations.

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Back in the Zoom meeting, there were a few nods at what I had said in my response to the team leader's ironic point, and although you could see this quite easily in the display of online video portraits, it was still difficult to see how this conversation was really landing. I am used to observing how people are sitting, what their bodies have to say (we often say that the body betrays the will!), how or if they look at each other, to sense the mood of the room and other non-verbal cues. But this Zoom eco-system funnels what is usually the open, fluid and rounded spaces of face-to-face meetings and workshops into closed and flat TV squares. So, while we were promoting conversation as the medium and the message of a process to humanise culture change, I was worried that the vehicle itself would take us in the other direction. Zoom itself imposes a culture on conversations.

But in this group at least, I sensed an attentiveness that could override some of the disembodying limitations of Zoom. We had to try.

As obvious as a conversational approach to culture change may be, it is not always easy to help committed and confident professionals, who are used to talking under the pressure of project delivery deadlines, to improve the way they speak and listen to each other. *How* do we talk about the problems we have about talking to each other? Well, you just do, but it is an ironic challenge.

Culture is itself the most powerful thing that blocks itself changing because it lives in our habitual, unconscious selves. So, we wondered if they would give themselves enough time and space to experience new ways of conversing before declaring this dialogue project a success or failure. We had to convince them to find some patience and lower their expectations somewhat or at least lengthen their timelines.

Work overload

> *"One of my staff members apologised to me saying he was so stressed in the day that he didn't have the energy to work at night."*

> Comment from a manager we interviewed

In the survey and various dialogues, work overload came up in several ways. It was almost too obvious an issue, and seemingly too impossible an issue to begin to confront. The organisation has been, simultaneously, reeling from financial shortages and so it would not be easy to talk about more sustainable workloads while staff were being retrenched and their responsibilities being shared out amongst the surviving staff. The wind was blowing the other way.

Work overload is a hugely consequential issue that threatens the viability of any organisation. But it is many-layered or many-sourced, stretching from individual choice, through team culture, management style and in this case up through to the dominating demands of the Aid Industry. Culture plays a small determining and a larger reinforcing role, but the reverberating cultural consequences and human cost are significant. Let's explore the layers.

This organisation attracts and employs some of the most dedicated development workers on earth. Many, if not most, see their work as a life calling and, when put into situations of poverty, oppression or disaster, that dedication is likely to be fired up even more. It is common amongst activists and humanitarian workers to work themselves to a standstill and even burnout if they are not restrained by their managers or colleagues. Compulsory leave-taking, time-off in lieu etc. are vital formal policy restraints but colleagues and managers keeping a friendly eye on this is most important.

But these restraints are not easy to apply. We heard from some staff that they are at the receiving end of desperate calls for help from communities they already know, that are humanly impossible to turn their backs on. Culture, policy, management interventions do not always have answers, but the issue here is that they hardly know how or when to even discuss this amongst themselves.

When individuals are allowed to sacrifice themselves through overwork the organisation's soul and purpose is sacrificed no less. This observation from Thomas Merton comes to mind:

> *"There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist fighting for peace by non-violent methods most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many*

projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes one's work for peace. It destroys one's inner capacity of peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of one's work because it kills the roots of inner wisdom which make work fruitful."

Again, the ironic trap of a culture that does not afford itself the space for self-awareness.

Activist and humanitarian organisations are already well-known for cultures which reward over-work and punish people who work normal hours, however subtly. This is typically communicated through remarks or innuendo that appreciate overwork and criticise working regular hours. And so, a heroic culture takes hold and behind it grows the shadow of the fear of being noticed for working normal hours, while those in need suffer. And mid- and lower-level managers, who are often promoted for their self-sacrifice, become powerful models of overwork.

This layer of workload pressures is an issue of culture, front and centre, easily becoming the unspoken norm, part of the job. But there are more layers.

Poor work organisation and management can also create over-work which more creative or smart approaches might solve, relieving work pressure. Are these culture issues? Perhaps, as people get used to poor organisation and management as the norm, but these cannot be dealt with only through culture change.

Our relationship to time is another facet of the same irony that the team leader had alluded to about using projects to change project culture. Simply put, the members of the Culture Change Team had volunteered their work time to lead a change initiative on top of all their other work, to shift a culture heavily marked by work-life imbalance and burn-out. In other words, they hardly had the time to change the way the organisation works with time. And, in similar vein, we were told that the work teams were too busy to give up more than a few hours for the envisaged dialogues.

Woodcutters with little time to sharpen their axes.

We were not surprised. We have come across this in almost every organisation we have worked with and always struggle to convince them of the value of investing sufficient time and resources in quality reflection and learning. Practices that are likely to save them time down the line. They never disagree but remain trapped in a system that does not give them the opportunity, partly of their own making and partly imposed.

Again, the question is whether this is a cultural issue, a habit to shift or the consequence of another dynamic that culture change cannot address.

An organisation's relationship to time has two dimensions. In Greek mythology Chronos was the God of time, hence chronological time, exact, calculated and predetermined. Project time. Deadlines. On the other hand, Kairos was the God of the opportune moment, of right timing, "It depends", fluid and sensed time. We all live between these notions of time in so many ways, not least NGOs who work under the chronological deadlines of donors but must, in their practice, also respect the 'kairological' timing of the people they support, of communities working in their own culture of time and in the reality of complex and unpredictable contexts.

The relationship that many Aid Industry donors have to time and money, especially the big ones, is not much different from the bankers of the business world, rippling through the organisational and field practices of the entire development world. Chronos is their God and compliance to deadlines their practice. But are these primarily issues of culture? Are they interesting differences between

doings things this way or that, or are they matters of brandishing the power of their money and demanding compliancy under their notion of accountability for the use of handed down resources, indeed of disrespecting the very notion of culture of the very people they say they are serving. It boils down to the question of whose will dominates.

Through this, the Aid Industry drives a powerful managerialist culture, as part of project-based systems and procedures, like Logical Frameworks, which are, in essence, methods to better manage a global culture of mistrust between those who give resources and those who need them. While the Aid Industry might be a response to global inequity it is at the same time a reflection of it. Another inescapable irony.

The promises and claims that INGOs makes about the "impact" they can deliver, so that they can attract resources and attention to their cause, creates an internal pressure that amplifies everything, mobilising and activating the staff in extraordinary ways. Many staff told us how lucky and honoured they have felt to be working for such a pre-eminent organisation doing such worthy work. And the world is watching them and so protecting the brand is a vital task central to several job descriptions.

Many of the INGOs we have worked with are large operations often with billion-dollar budgets and so marketing backed by evidence of success is a key preoccupation to keep the funding taps open. Monitoring and Evaluation become centred on relentlessly driving the delivery of pre-planned and contracted outcomes with donors, and of measuring and reporting impact to them. The brutal consequence is that keeping the enterprise afloat so often becomes, in practice, a higher cause than improving practice itself.

Some managers may put unnecessary pressure on staff to over-work because it reflects well on them when their staff are seen as high performers. But they are under relentless pressure to deliver the results that come from higher up the Aid Industry and this results in many of the behaviours we have heard about in the survey, of bullying managers, of burnout, of anger at the hierarchy that imposes unworkable plans and practices.

Where proof of project impact dominates, the other tragic and inescapable irony is that all of this renders impossible a deeply developmental approach to the kind of social change that many of them yearn for. We have witnessed this, where more radical NGOs and practitioners work, unbranded and in the background, with creative, catalytic practices that support local actors to unlock their own knowledge and resourcefulness, putting forward the achievements of the leadership of communities (rather than their own), working in their fluid 'kairological time', paced and driven by their own sense and urgencies rather than imposed, contracted project deadlines. More ironic for the donors themselves is that a catalytic approach usually requires less intensive time input and fewer resources, with more sustainable results.

Not Lego but Gardening

On the surface, the organisation is a large, branded bureaucracy, especially in its higher echelons, shaped externally by the compliance systems of the Aid Industry.

But in many ways, this is just the visible shell while something far more interesting and complex lives inside the organisation: its human, organic, invisible life of interpersonal relationships of collegiality and rivalry, the passion and drives of its activism and the continuous influence that feeds it through the roots that extend into the many-faceted societies and communities in the countries they work in. This is the realm of informal culture, the organisational unconscious, where, as Peter Drucker quipped, "culture eats strategy for breakfast".

Part of our challenge, for ourselves and the culture team, has been to keep bringing the invisible back into view and focus. We so easily fall back into paying attention to what we can see and hear in front of us, things that seem more real, like working with Lego pieces, all reachable on the table. But this work is more like gardening, observing and connecting with the inner streams and cycles of organisational sap, root and soil.

We were still discovering the substance and texture of their culture, and there were clearly complex layers of challenges that would resist obvious interventions. One aspect of their energetic, activist culture of tackling problems, we discovered, was brainstorming all possible solutions and then attacking the problem on all sides at once. At one point they had five working groups, each with a project plan of at least half a dozen activities.

We tried to suggest more modest approaches. For us complex problems often need to be met with an emergent, exploratory, learning approach and so we were trying to encourage them to avoid any grand plans and to get used to thinking and experimenting with ways forward for themselves, a step at a time in a process to tap and grow their own experience and wisdom. Now and then we had to suggest to them to shelve some of their projects and to focus on a few that mattered most.

What holds our conversation captive?

Surely, we know how to have good conversations. Have we not all experienced these in our lives? We know this stuff. The challenge, I believe, is not how to have fruitful conversations but to unlearn what holds our good conversing captive.

As a facilitator I see this as central to my practice. There are well-known approaches that can encourage 'safe spaces' where people can be their authentic selves and really listen to each other with curiosity and trustfulness. (By the way, in these conversations with Culture Change Team, the term 'brave spaces' came up somewhere as a preferred alternative to 'safe spaces'.) But organisations cannot hire facilitators for all their conversations and so this facilitation capacity increasingly becomes a central aspect of leadership practice, whether by formal or informal leaders, supported by a culture of human dialogue itself. The process is the product.

In my mind, the difficult work lies at the level of the will. This is not about people not having the will to participate in healthy conversation. We are social beings and generally we have a strong innate will to participate, to contribute, to be seen, to listen and be heard and to be acknowledged.

What holds our conversing captive in many organisations is a complex mix of fear, doubt, self-doubt and sometimes resentment. Within a team culture there may be a climate of fear, or a perhaps subtle diminishing or ridiculing of younger members, of women or people of colour. This may compound existing feelings of self-doubt and insecurity, especially if there are not pro-active efforts to include new or marginalised voices through the cultivation of active *interest* in what they have to say.

Unlocking the staff's innate capacities for healthy conversations has now become central to ongoing culture change, described further below.

Sadness as a path of change

One thing my colleague and I observed and experienced in several of the earlier culture team meetings, was a palpable sadness. I usually left these meetings feeling a little sad myself, not dispirited, just sad. This was not surprising at the time because working with dysfunctional cultures can be saddening when put side-by-side with our aspirational values.

It started to occur to us that something more interesting was happening, something that the team might be unconsciously working through, in themselves. She and I discussed this in our reflections, but we struggled to find a way to reflect this back to the team. Who wants to hear how sad they are? What we started to see, or actually feel, is that they were unable to be anything else but an expression of the deep sorrow living in the soul of the organisation. Holding a deep collective empathy for the organisation. And maybe this was good and real. An organisation that should have protected and nurtured the best of what it means to be human in the world had been found wanting. And these staff members, who had been so proud to be part of a global movement to change the world, were feeling complicit, despite their efforts to do otherwise. And even though they had stepped up first to do something about this, it did not yet change how they felt.

As we experienced this sadness it helped us to appreciate not only how much it meant to them but realised that it might be a deep well of authentic experiencing, a lamentation to be journeyed through as a source of real movement.

Recently, I have become familiar with the ancient practice of lamentation, and I wonder whether this was a little of what was happening in the group.

> "Lamentation dates way back to the earliest centuries and crosses almost all cultures. It was part of the blues in the US South: songs of slaves and then freed slaves and poor sharecroppers of all colours in the mean Delta who sang to rid their souls of pain from unremitting stress of discrimination, violence, injustice, then poverty, while still toiling away in horrendous circumstances. In all the holy texts, lamentation is a way to release pain, "with a witness" to make the ritual more potent and useful."[4]

We wondered if there was something to do with our observation, perhaps to make it more conscious for them as it was for us, but we couldn't find the space or words that made sense, so we let it be. It seemed to need its own time. It was their process.

As we reflected on this phenomenon, we were inspired by the Austrian poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, who saw sadness as an essential pathway of change:

> Almost all our sadnesses are moments of tension that we find paralyzing because we no longer hear our surprised feelings living…. the sadness too passes: the new thing in us, the added thing, has entered into our heart, has gone into its inmost chamber and is not even there anymore, — is already in our blood. And we do not learn what it was. We could easily be made to believe that nothing has happened, and yet we have changed, as a house changes into which a guest has entered.

And week after week they came to these meetings, to a sad but not depressing place, away from a place where they were expected to perform, to be models of culture change, to a more soulful gathering where they could be sad with each other for a while. A time of grieving, of lost illusions that must be simply experienced, to be journeyed through and past. It is hard to say when they moved through this, but they have, and the meetings have become lighter

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[4] Page 24: Generative Leadership: Releasing Life in a Turbulent World. Written by the 6th Barefoot Guide Writer's Collective. Published by the Barefoot Connection www.barefootguide.org

Inside-Out Change

It would be hard to pinpoint whether their own soul journey as a team, as described above, influenced what started to happen, but at some point 'self-change', or 'inside-out change' as we like to call it, was mentioned in the group and gave new impetus to its deliberations. In many ways that became the orientation they most easily caught onto, perhaps because the larger organisation felt so impervious to change, where the leaders seemed so busy and had delegated that task to them.

But this was also fine for us because although we could see that some of the larger causes of their culture issue lay above and beyond their reaches in the very nature of the Aid Industry, we knew that individual agency was always a place from which to begin change.

Although culture change for the department would need its larger dialogues, we suggested that it might be too quick to jump into those, that some warming up, some individual and interpersonal "voice strengthening" might help prepare the way to ensure that the marginal voices could come through. Cultivating participation cannot be done as a sudden, imposed event but needs growing from within and an informal chat with a trusted colleague or a small group discussion felt like the right place to start.

After some discussion and preparation, they decided to experiment with an intimate conversational beginning. They put out an invitation to each staff member to connect with one or two other members over coffee or lunch, one-to-one, offered the staff a couple of prompting questions to help them to explore their personal experience of the organisation's culture. We had no idea what the uptake would be, but it was invitational and respectful. As it turned out about a third of the staff (of several hundred) did this. Anecdotal feedback was surprisingly positive, and this encouraged the team to look for the next right step.

Having encouraged them not to rush a big culture change project plan it seemed they had found this to be good evidence of the value of that approach.

As a next step the team decided to create identity-based dialogues, essentially facilitated Zoom meetings (which we were asked to help design, but they would facilitate) where women or men or managers or people of colour or of different gender or sexual orientations could gather with like to share their experiences of the culture as peers. This might help them to have their feelings validated, to feel some solidarity, to gain perspective amidst any helplessness, confusion, sadness or anger and hopefully to strengthen their voices out of their common experiences, to prepare themselves to bring to the broader dialogues. Again, about a third of staff stepped forward to participate.

All of these would prepare the soil for the wider team dialogues where issues of culture could be faced more squarely.

After lockdown – the phase of dialogues suddenly happens

In March 2020, the Coronavirus struck the world and the organisation. The culture dialogues were put on hold, hatches were battened down and all consultants like us were let go of. It was a depressing shock because we were just getting somewhere, as if all of the careful effort of building understanding and experience had come to naught. Oddly, all these Zoom meetings I have described to date were pre-Covid, so while all of our other consulting work transitioned to Zoom, Covid kicked us off of it!

But then eight months later, out of the blue, we were called in again to walk alongside the culture team to help it to pick up where things had left off.

We were plunged straight into organising and facilitating the wider Departmental 'culture dialogues'. These were the dialogues we had started talking about, as more spacious processes where stories and issues could be well surfaced and listened to, where conversational change would surface empathy and form a foundation for longer culture change.

Two times two-hour Zoom sessions were put together and held, each for different staff from different time zones, focused on stories and then on surfacing ideas for change. They were also the first compulsory culture sessions for all staff to attend. Despite the virtual Zoom ecosystem, the feedback was sufficiently positive that the Culture Change Team felt ready to move into the second phase.

This next phase, just beginning as I write this, is based on a seed that we had planted earlier, based on good previous experiences. The idea is that working towards a longer-term healthy culture must be built into the regular, rhythmic life of the organisation and not left to periodic surveys and crisis management.

Pens-down conversations

Practically, the idea is that each of the various teams in the Department look for time (15 to 30 minutes) at the end of a chosen regular meeting, every month or so, to keep the culture conversation alive, so that they may consciously and collectively work with the issues that matter to them as a renewing process embedded in their organisational rhythms. This is called a 'pens-down' discussion where things that are weighing on people, issues that have no other outlet, many of them inevitably issues of culture, can be aired, named, possibly addressed and if not then put on the organisational development agenda.

This is about having a free, safe and brave space where we can put aside day-to-day operational concerns and speak to each other about things that matter to us as people, about what "I am experiencing with us", about what matters to me and should matter to us if we value each other.

In my experience this kind of space can sometimes spill into more existential questions of "why am I here?" or "what are we really doing?" and help to make connections, or identify the disconnections, between individual and organisational identity, even purpose. They will not be resolved here but they are given air and can be noted by leadership for follow-up. It is when issues cannot surface that they acquire a hidden life of their own, entering the invisible, cultural life of the organisation with unpredictable and often unfortunate effects that can cause distress for staff and rob the organisation of its energy and vitality.

It is a simple idea and does not require putting aside time for an additional meeting or workshop and may indeed save much time through the timeous pre-empting of problems down the line while growing healthier and more productive working relationships.

We are currently working with the team leaders to facilitate these 'pens-down' discussions. One of the debates in the Culture Change Team revolved around two positions: one is that team leaders cannot always be trusted to hold the space where they may be part of the problem versus another that team leaders must learn to see holding team culture as part of their responsibility and that the organisation cannot forever rely on outsiders to facilitate this. The second path has been chosen, and with that a series of three workshops will soon be held to coach the team leaders into their culture role and equip them with the skills to facilitate the simple 'pens-down' processes.

But still I am beset with doubts because although the dialogues and 'pens down' processes feel real and manageable they seem to pale in comparison with the larger problem of the context that

produces many of the culture problems of this INGO experiences. And so, I am feeling it is all a bit like Nasruddin, looking where the light is better but avoiding the real issues lying in the dark, those issuing from a careless Aid Industry, especially that of work overload.

But we are doing what we can, working where we can with the people who want to do the work, with some faith that this is the least we can do and that perhaps it will prove to be the roots from which something significant may grow. As we live between Chronos and Kairos, so we also live between self-doubt and faith in each other. The point is to keep living, to keep trying.

Standing back and looking ahead

There is no magic wand here. These kinds of spaces need to be committed to and worked at if they are to succeed. Discrimination linked to race, gender and sexuality, bullying, work overload and burnout don't just melt away when people talk and listen better, or even when organisations remember what they fundamentally are there for. But if we build organisational cultures that are more focused on fundamental purpose and ways of being together that regularly foreground this, they are more likely to catch, pre-empt and even excise the effects of inequities, long before they take hold and fester like secrets.

The influence of the Aid Industry still hovers. Is it possible that greater awareness of the consequences of issues like work overload can prompt the Aid Industry to smarten up and realise that what it is asking for is unsustainable, and to make some necessary adjustments? Sadly, I don't think so. I fear that we are in the thrall of the competitive nature of the whole system, with business and government supplying the funding and driving the agendas. Few that have the power would be interested, let alone see that there is a problem.

Fortunately, there are other impulses and streams at play which give INGOs some different choices. Some are moving that way, and some are dipping their toes in new waters.

This is where I would like to end this whole reflection, on a note of hope and possibility.

We know that when dysfunction and crisis emanate from the centre of congealed power, stuck and impervious to changing itself, then change may only come from activism on the peripheries. In the stuck development world there are many peripheries, possibly including the culture teams where we are working.

The people we are working with, and many of their colleagues we have met along the way, come from those ranks which have a foot in each of the worlds of the Aid Industry and the communities they serve, in both lands of Chronos and Kairos, and are amongst those in the organisation who have a grasp of both to help navigate, bridge and broker the kind of changes that can shift things. But in which direction?

There is a growing phenomenon of rising civil society networks embracing many kinds of organisations, some of which include INGOs. Their forms are liquid and their cultures horizontal, cooperative and yes, increasingly skilled and naturally tuned into deeper listening, questioning and conversing. I am hopeful that the gathering crises of climate and inequality will give increasing impetus to these. The alternative is to cynically hope for authoritarian solutions.

Can INGOs find more of a role in these new forms and impulses? This organisation is aware of these, and some experimentation is happening, but it is not where the centre of gravity is or is even heading. A deeper understanding of how life and social change really happen must first spread and take hold, in many ways the mirror opposite of the logic of Projects. And with this a vision of

catalytic social change practices that help to unlock local resourcefulness and resilience, and that can connect and multiply these for wider systemic change. A new culture that supports that will be required but not the kind that can comfortably co-exist in a project-dominated practice and culture.

As I write this it feels like a big ask and certainly will not happen through a project or campaign. But I have a strong sense that if the people of the quality we have encountered in the culture teams like this can find the courage and solidarity to prompt and even lead new conversations then something much more consequential than culture can shift. Perhaps the key culture that has to shift lies between them, about how they deal with their own fears and doubts, about what they accept or reject as the given norm and a deep questioning of current purpose and practice. Radical conversations. This would be the deepest work of culture change.