

The Conspiracy of Hope: A Local Work-Based Community Struggles with a Global Corporation

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ABSTRACT This exploratory paper describes a work-based community of people, embedded within a larger framework, which in turn is part of a globally focused corporation. The people in the local community most at risk are females, who are highly stressed, so much so that a significant number leave the workplace without having other jobs. The role of the community psychologist is one that addresses such situations, by seeking information, then exploring possible ways to intervene with the participants. The particular intervention selected and described, though designed and planned but not implemented in this particular situation, could help solve at least some of the problems of the dysfunctional company (B). Implementing the Kilmann Culture Track might ensure that support groups are set up. Critical to the success of the intervention would be the involvement of key personnel with both a top down and bottom up approach, along with constant evaluation of both positive and negative effects. A cyclical Action Research Process that is continuous would allow for management of the culture and community to ensure adaptation. This article illustrates the potential role and activities that can be played by community psychologists.

INTRODUCTION

"Community psychology is about understanding people within their social worlds and using this understanding to improve people's well being. It is about understanding and helping" (Orford, 1992, p. vii).

"I love the word conspiracy, it comes from the Latin conspirare which means to breathe the spirit together . . . the spirit of hope" (Deegan, 1972).

The new and emerging discipline of community psychology presents a challenging vision, daring to examine how we live, and pose questions about how we could and should live in the future. Given the power and predominance of trans-national business corporations, the challenges are particularly great for those

working within a corporate environment. But in almost any setting, community psychology with an intent of intervening in the life of a group of people to make things better, may be comparable to the difficult feat of mounting a running horse (Buckley, 1968). The community psychologist is especially challenged because there is so much to learn from virtually all disciplines and human-environmental experiences, and even further, so much to be done across the entire globe. Where to begin and at what level to intervene in exactly which communities are questions that pervade each and every situation. Leonard Jason (1991) describes social action initiatives: one does not have to begin by changing the world, small initiatives can make notable differences. But choosing and selecting the particular initiative becomes vitally important when a psychologist (change agent or as right-wing ideologues might state in a negative tone of voice, social engineers) and a community of people are seeking to create "the good life".

For many community psychologists, one option readily available is to choose to study and seek to transform the local community within which they live and work. Such communities have a huge impact on personal life, professional life, and others including families, children, neighbours, friends, and so on. Further, some global corporations, geared as they often are solely to profit, are close to psychological or emotional deserts in which many of the inhabitants feel there is no hope. This paper provides a case study and a plan, so far unfulfilled but with potential, to bring about social change.

A DESCRIPTIVE CASE STUDY

The particular community chosen for this case study, designated as Community A, is currently in deep trouble. The core of the community

comprises the workers in one floor of one office block in a major New Zealand city. The people on this floor are the sales, marketing and planning staff employed by and who work for one company (B). This group of forty-some individuals has been designated in this article as a local work-based community, for the members of the group have several features that are similar to those commonly defined as a community. For example, Community A has "walkability" - a single person or visiting community psychologist can get acquainted with all members on a face to face basis, and even visit them daily. All members can observe and participate freely within this local community. The level, size and scope was specifically chosen, as the entire company (designated as Company B) is too large for easy accessibility, and a single component would probably be too small to be representative. Further, if and when interventions are offered, Community A would be a "manageable block" sufficient in size and scope to provide a challenge to a community psychologist to intervene and try to turn the members from being subjected to a stressed and unhappy situation into an empowered community of hope.

Community is, of course, a multifaceted term. Community can be and is a locality which refers to territory or geographically defined ideas of community (Heller, 1989). A second meaning of community is the relational network which focuses on the qualities of interaction and social life that pull people together (Gusfield 1975; Hunter and Riger, 1986; McMillan and Chavis, 1986). This specific community chosen comes under the umbrella of each definition, being geographically bound and encompassing networks of individuals who interact. The members of this community (A) work within Company B, a formal organisation with people brought together by common interests in financial gain.

Community A is made up of fifteen to seventeen male and twenty-five to thirty female salaried employees, making a minimum of over \$30,000 per annum. The average income of New Zealanders is around \$15,000 per year, so these people are relatively well off. The senior positions within Community A are all held by males. Ethnically, the people are predominantly European in descent, and most are under the age of forty. The work roles in Community A

involve front line duties having direct liaison with the larger market, and represent a very high pressure environment as the industry is increasingly price competitive. The work community is dealing with products that must be maintained and worked with daily - things have to happen each and every day with each item.

To understand the community (A) and the larger company (B) and the still larger global corporation (C) of which A and B are a part, one needs to understand how they fit together with other systems both within the city and in the larger world. Barker (1968, 1978) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) used the analogy of nested assemblies, that is, systems within larger systems like Russian or Chinese boxes, each nesting within one slightly larger or smaller. Community A is a small part of Company B, which is in turn a small part of an international corporation (C) and also, a part of a particular New Zealand city.

Company B has over 1,500 members, which is part of a larger global corporate empire (C) with over 20,000 employees spread out internationally. Being one of forty plus persons in a local community (A) in the vast sea of many thousands of employees makes one feel insignificant and powerless, particularly in a patriarchal hierarchy characterised by constant change and restructuring.

Company B has features of a closed-technical system (Kilman and Sexton, 1983; Kilman, 1985, 1991). The emphasis is on internal efficiency with little concern about where the resources, including people and staff, are coming from or where products are going or how well products are received. The production driven entity processes 150,000 items per day. Being production driven may be internally efficient, but is not necessarily functional to the employees in today's changing, demanding world.

The structure of Company B is hierarchical with all decisions being made by a small, powerful, elite team of males. Their focus appears to be designed to maintain the easy access of male senior management to still greater levels of power, influence and reward. According to Kilman's view, closed-technical systems have to ignore the informal personal and the social to rely more on formal rules and regulations. As a result individuality is sub-

merged within the assigned role and authority gets concentrated at the top. Individuals have little control over their situations, and have trouble participating in any meaningful way (Kilmann, 1985). This system description adequately describes Company B and is somewhat unlike that found in the smaller, more intimate, slightly less hierarchically organised, Community A.

The major employer, Company B, has in the past third of the year, found that one fourth of the people involved in Community A chose to quit. This happened primarily because of stress and despair. They chose to leave their work without even having another job to turn towards. They just gave up. Why people choose to take on a high-risk situation in a larger environment of high unemployment and stressful international competition is difficult to answer without careful investigation.

The Annual Report of Corporate B highlights the cold and calculated way restructuring and severance is viewed. This report and its accompanying attitude has a profound influence on the prevailing view in the company that people are disposable. "Restructuring changes of \$X million were reflected in operating income. The major components of the restructuring plan related to employee severance and relocation costs (\$X million) and facilities consolidation and closure costs (\$X million). It was anticipated that the company would reduce head count by X thousand." The tone of the paragraph from a typical company report is the same as that used in discussing the number of products to be processed and sold. Community A and Company B are under constant threat of change and restructuring in what is now an internationally competitive, global market.

Because Company B is production driven, the company does not react to staff needs, nor to market forces and it also fails to satisfy changing customer needs. This is currently a factor leading towards poor results. Company B has recently endured another major restructuring, the fifth in six years. Over the last half year, everyone in the community had to apply for and succeed in getting a new role, a new title, and different responsibilities within the larger company. As a result, all employees have been in the current setting for a relatively short period.

Meaning, goals, and energy are provided by the surrounding culture. Such movement

enables a group to become productive and active, or destructive. In many organisations, the productive forces are not mobilised, especially to assist the organisation. As a result, there is little energy among members to put into their jobs or interaction with others in the company. The words from managers in the elite above are ignored, for workers no longer care. In a sense, the organisation's soul is dying or nearly dead (Kilmann, 1991). Kilmann could have been writing about Company B because the concepts fit so aptly. Company B is a psychological and social desert with a major problem in that twenty five percent of the workers in Community A, all of whom have worked very hard to gain work skills and qualifications and all of whom have been career oriented, have chosen to leave. They have sought to return to the larger community outside and beyond and away from Company B. These people are highly stressed, many are in ill psychological or physical health, and most have no jobs to turn towards. As well, the majority of others in the company are in varying states of distress, many are apathetic, especially with regard to their jobs with the company.

Given the situation, some might ask if change is possible. Others have already surrendered. As stated by Deegan (1992) in a speech, "If we plant a seed in the desert and it fails to grow, do we ask what is wrong with the seed? No. The real conspiracy lies in this: to look at the environment around the seed and to ask what must change in this environment such that the seed can grow?"

Intervention

Changing the desert, Community A and possibly, Company B itself, into a hope filled working environment in which people can grow, is an enormous challenge. The problem already noted is that twenty-five per cent of the members of the community have decided to leave or have already left. These people, skilled, qualified, and career oriented, departed in stressed condition, ill health, and without alternative jobs.

Community psychology focuses on well-being in neighbourhoods, workplaces, and most of all, communities of people. Therefore, the interactions that take place within such collectives is revealing of power and social support, and health of people within (Orford,

1992). The aspects of power and social support within this Corporation (C) and its component parts, Company B and Community A, and their effects on stress and turnover or resignations, are worthy of investigation. The purpose of any such investigation would be to design effective policies and strategies to sustain long term perspectives within the organisation. We could change the environment and thereby improve the lot of those who work within that situation (Quick et al., 1987). Changing the culture within an organisation is a key strategy for the culture sets the tone for conduct, and helps determine what is valued. The culture also prescribes how authority gets exercised (James and Saville-Smith, 1987).

An additional factor of great import in this particular situation concerns gender differences. Given that ninety-one percent of the staff who departed without future jobs was female, the focus of this research project was restricted. A questionnaire was designed to interview these women, to gain information to bring out the unspoken reasons why they decided to leave. Structured interviews would highlight problems that needed to be addressed, at least from the viewpoint of the Company (B).

However, the women involved were extremely reluctant to participate. Confidentiality was absolutely paramount, for their protection, and for the protection of the researcher as well. The reasons the women participated were because they were close personal friends of the researcher, and because they were promised absolute confidentiality. None would permit tape recording. In the end only four of the women involved were interviewed, because of the time it took to persuade them to participate, the actual length of time for the interview, and because of the possible danger to the interviewer. This latter factor emerged, for the management and even peers who noted that the researcher was associating with women who departed made them negative and suspicious. These problems parallel the point made by Katz and Kahn (1978) that authoritarian regimes characteristically seek to limit communication across horizontal layers of an organisation for fear that ideological and other controls might become loosened.

The four independent responses to the questionnaire were very similar, and therefore presumably accurate as to the impact Company B has had on the women in this "desert."

Problems noted included: 1) gender stereotyping, 2) limited female work roles, 3) low value of and respect for women, 4) the invisibility of women in the Company, 5) lack of access to power, influence and rewards, 6) the unwritten rules of the "old boys network" to ensure the rules are followed, and 7) the observation that women choosing to leave are weary, frustrated and silent. These problems indicate that this company is in urgent need of change.

Another subsequent investigation sought information about the strengths of the existing company structure. A total of eight women working within the Company (B) were interviewed via the Delphi Technique to highlight existing strengths. Four major strengths were agreed upon by those women: 1) the recent appointment of a female manager who reported to the managing director, 2) Company B was a growth industry within the country with positive future prospects, 3) Company B had state of the art technology and information systems, and 4) the employees were very capable, sincere, talented people committed to the survival of both their community (A) and company (B).

Given these strengths and weaknesses as identified, a strategic intervention could be planned, from the perspective of community psychology. Following Orford's (1992) suggestions, a balance between top down and bottom up approaches and involvement of staff and key people in the support of any intervention were deemed essential.

Action Planning

Setting goals for intervention, and consideration of alternative courses of action constitute the action planning stage of the Action Research Process (Susman and Evered, 1978). Designing a conspiracy of hope to change a desert into a positive environment in which people can grow may sound unusual, but constitutes the essence of the efforts. Changing the culture means changing the normative social behaviour prevalent in the entire corporation, i.e., the norms or code of behaviour that is used by a group as an ideal. In this culture, the norms pressure members to devalue and make women marginal, to disbelieve that anything will change, to discourage any new behaviour without question and to discourage anyone from talking about the situation.

Barriers to change are many and great. The structure of this corporation is hierarchical with a small, powerful elite team of males focused on the maintenance of the access of male senior management to power, influence and reward by ensuring the preservation of the codes and rules of the old boys network. The barriers for lower level men and for women are very real, but there are key strengths and weaknesses that can be capitalised upon by a change agent such as a community psychologist. A stressor noted is the rapidly deteriorating financial viability of the organisation, which threatens the security of the elite team of males. The strengths, weaknesses, and stressful environment provide an opportunity to balance a top down and bottom up approach.

Lewin (1948, 1950) theorised that change occurs in three stages. The initial stage is "unfreezing" so that a given system can change, the second entails creating actual change or "moving," and the third stage is "refreezing" or stabilising at a new level of functioning (Price and Polister, 1980). Using such a theoretical framework means that an intervention by a community psychologist seeking to change normative social behaviour would begin with the unfreezing of the system. This would open up the possibility of change. A first step would be to identify key change agents, demonstrators, patrons and defenders. A key change agent with influence is the Human Resources Manager, who has power and direct access to the Managing Director. In discussions, the Human Resources Manager perceives cultural change as being critical to ensure the long-term viability of the organisation. The Managing Director must become a patron of change to ensure that things will happen. The strong relationship with and respect for the new Human Resources Manager would be important in creating change at this time. The Human Resources Manager might be able to convince the Managing Director to support culture change as a way to reduce the unacceptably high turnover, which creates an enormous dollar cost to the Company (B).

The Managing Director's role is critical. The top level executives, and especially the Chief Executive Officer set an example or model, affect the entire corporation, and possess the power to change things (Kilmann, 1991). Demonstrators and defenders would be members within the community who have a real commitment to

the survival of the community. Demonstrators and defenders could receive social support, relevant information and ideas about coping, and help in dealing with an atmosphere of ambivalence and resistance.

Intervention based on Kilmann's five tracks to organisational success (Kilmann, 1991) would be appropriate for a community or corporation. The initial stage of intervention would be to follow the suggested "culture track," that is, to expose actual norms within the community. Under the guidance of the Human Resources Manager, the members of the group could list the norms that currently guide their behaviours and attitudes. Then, step two, the members would discuss where the organisation is going, and what types of behaviour are necessary for survival. The third step would be a survey for measuring the gap between the current culture and what should be. The Kilmann-Saxton Culture-Gap Survey (Kilmann and Saxton, 1983) would be one appropriate measuring device. Step four is an effort to close the culture gaps identified in the survey, and chart a direction for culture change. This would lead to the fifth step, the implementation of new norms into the everyday life of the community. Enforcement of new behaviour is critical. This intervention should take place over several months or even years as the current culture is highly dysfunctional and the change required is great. As the levels of fear and mistrust become less, the community members will be able to openly acknowledge their concerns and fears and band together for the benefit of the community.

The final stage in the Action Research Process after action planning and action taking is evaluation. The type of evaluation that could be used to measure the consequences of the intervention would be to monitor staff turnover, particularly that of women and lower ranked members of the community, and to conduct exit interviews with a standardized questionnaire.

Further evaluations could be carried out with surveys on an ongoing basis to monitor the effectiveness of aligning community norms against those norms necessary for the organization to survive. An important part of managing a corporate culture is to continue monitoring and assessing norms. If a culture is not managed clearly and effectively, then future disruptions are likely (Kilmann, 1991)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In summary and conclusion, this exploratory paper describes a work-based community of people, embedded within a larger framework, which in turn is part of a globally focused corporation. The people in the local community most at risk are females, who are highly stressed, so much so that a significant number leave the workplace without having other jobs. The role of the community psychologist is one that addresses such situations, by seeking information, then exploring possible ways to intervene with the participants. The particular intervention selected and described, though designed and planned but not implemented in this particular situation, could help solve at least some of the problems of the dysfunctional company (B). Implementing the Kilmann Culture Track might ensure that support groups are set up. Critical to the success of the intervention would be the involvement of key personnel with both a top down and bottom up approach, along with constant evaluation of both positive and negative effects. A cyclical Action Research Process that is continuous would allow for management of the culture and community to ensure adaptation. This article illustrates the potential role and activities that can be played by community psychologists.

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