**“You don’t think you can make a difference, do you?”**

**Clare Rigg**

I opened my mouth to make a retort, defensively, to the woman who had stormed late into the departmental meeting and scathingly challenged me to explain the method I was attempting to use to make a decision on resource allocation. No matter that I had pre-circulated an agenda and documentation, had consulted on the proposed method, and believed I had an open door policy for anyone to come and discuss things. She felt justified in her contemptuous, indignant behaviour. And where she started, others followed. In the moment of catching the words that were forming on my lips, and the anger behind them, I sensed myself about to, as I saw it, sink to the same level of disrespectful, unkind and bullying distain which prevailed in interactions between department members, and most particularly towards ‘The Management’. I checked myself and thought, ‘This is not who I am; this is not how I want to be relating to people; I have to do better than this’. I also knew I was not going to alter anything in that dysfunctional ethos of communication if I got drawn into the same ways of inter-relating. This incident concerned ethical leadership, because for me this was a question of my core values and integrity. Recognising a connection between the threat to my self-control and holding true in how I responded, I found Kathryn Goldman Schuyler’s ideas of integrity very helpful, in the sense of ‘the capacity to hold one’s shape’ despite high levels of stress (2010: 26).

The title of this contribution is the question a wise colleague challenged me with when I took on the role of head of section, proffered as I described its problems, personalities and the frequent turnover of previous heads. But I persisted in taking the role, propelled by my ego and my sense that I could perhaps be a better leader/more mature/better listener…. [more fool me]

As a middle manager, you accept that, as principal-agent theory tells us, you are the agent expected to implement senior management decisions. And you anticipate a degree of antipathy. But in my public sector organisation context, where austerity prevailed, where staff were accustomed to having little influence, and where fear of closure, particularly in my section, was rife following years of decline, middle managers were the accessible repository of staff angst and anger, whilst senior managers kept aloof.

As an agent of the principal (Director), some of the decisions I had to find ways of implementing inevitably were not ones I would have made myself. For example, closing down particular services. But that is the nature of middle management. In the forum of departmental meetings, some of these decisions became the lightning rod for combat. Almost like an opportunity to release anger and exorcise emotion. I drew solace from my understanding of psychodynamic literature (Vince, 2011) to try to remember that the ways people sub-consciously deal with their emotions lie at the heart of organisation practices. This helped me see the emotions people displayed, not as a personal attack, but as a product of their anxiety, projections or dependency. I sought to accept myself as a ‘container’ and interact in such a way that might aid a shift, allay anxiety, or at least not reinforce dependency.

Then I read Vince and Mazen’s (2014) work on violent innocence. I recognised in myself the idea that in one’s naivety one can end up allowing violence to be done. I identified how my own coping mechanism of constantly looking for the positive, always seeking out the possibilities in preference to the barriers, could perpetuate harm. I saw too late how the power dynamics throughout this organisation rendered perfectly capable, articulate people silent in meetings, and kept some awake in trepidation of the next encounter. I came to understand that the combative pattern of interactions had become entrenched and affected not just me, as the manager, but other organisation members who might want to voice dissenting views.

As one example, the Director informed me, just as one Christmas holiday period began, that he was taking a key staff member off my team for the next six months, after repeatedly assuring me this would not happen. In the austerity climate that severely restricted public sector recruitment of replacements, and yet with an obligation to deliver service to clients in the new year, I found myself coercing other colleagues to plug the gap. Critical management steers you to ask where the power lies. But I found it necessary to also ask, how are you being played? With this example I felt myself to be put in a position of perpetuating harm. Just as the senior manager acted without sufficient care or consideration of me, I was passing this on to my colleagues.

There is a lot about middle management that I found uncomfortable. The role is sandwiched between senior management and frontline staff. You expect to be asked to communicate, cajole and direct staff to implement decisions that you might not necessarily agree with yourself. I was good at using phrases like ‘this will be so good for your CV’ ‘there isn’t anyone else with the strengths to do this..’ in my attempts to persuade a colleague to take on an extra task. But when is this too much and too manipulative? And as you live with this sense of continuous compromise and discomfort, how do you stop yourself becoming acclimatised to being so-calculating. What is the trade-off? For me, I took on the role and I stayed for the period I did because there were things I felt I could improve in the service we delivered for clients. This was pre-eminent for me and for many of the people I worked with. This priority enabled us to work together and after 18 months I felt there was an improvement in trust, there were some achievements amongst staff to be proud of, and a gradual warming in the departmental interactions. However, into this fragile rapprochement, the senior management board threw yet another grenade. They presented a restructuring of the organisation and in this my department was demoted. Like a match to dry tinder this was enough to re-ignite the scarcely dormant fears in staff of closure of our particular service and there was uproar. During this period the Director refused to make himself available to meet staff, or even to respond to messages. In this vacuum the obvious recipient/target for staff angst, anger and anxiety was the departmental manager, me.

As I’ve said, as a middle manager you expect a degree of being the agent of a principal’s agency, but when you hear that principal boast of their desire to leave a legacy in history, and you see little respect or compassion for clients or colleagues in their actions, that was the moment at which I realised that to stay would be to further perpetuate violence, and no longer in innocence. When I realised I could not (as my wise colleague had counselled) make a difference for the better within the particular dynamics of my organisation, I felt the most ethical act to take was to leave.

**References**

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