

The Taboo against Being Real in Management

by **Brian Nichol**

A young man was appointed as a manager of a team of software specialists. One team member was a woman in her twenties who was very competent but discourteous towards her new boss. She did not greet him in the mornings, and she would continue to work on her computer when he tried to talk to with her. The manager felt hurt and angry, and worried about how to change their relationship. This one relationship added greatly to his stress in the new job.

An invisible part of organizations is the stress and pain associated with learning the role of manager. For many people the transition from specialist to manager is a rough road which stretches them to develop new competencies and to shift attitudes at the core of their personality.

It is entirely normal that a manager may have anxiety about confronting an employee, anger towards a resistant group, or fear of a project falling apart. However, the stress and emotional distress involved in learning to become a manager is largely disregarded as something which individuals should cope with on their own. That these emotions can be important to their learning is generally not recognized. Management training programs usually offer no forum for such discussions. In fact there seems to be a taboo against people being candid about these experiences. Consequently, they do not have support to talk over such episodes and feelings in a constructive way.

This is in marked contrast to the experience of training for psychotherapists. In this professional culture it is accepted that psychotherapists need to integrate emotional and cognitive learning. It is expected that trainees will experience their training as distressing at times. They take it for granted that they should work with their distressing emotions. They assume that the pain associated with learning is significant for development, and that painful episodes and emotions should be actively explored for their meaning and their contribution to the individual's development.

Admittedly psychotherapists and managers work with different populations, for different purposes, and with different contracts. However, the manager's role has significant elements in common with a psychotherapist, especially a group psychotherapist. Managers' work is largely with people, and their competence in relationships is important. Managers work with group dynamics. The manager's role induces projections and transferences which distort communications with employees.

This contrast in training approaches led me to research the significance of emotions in learning to become a therapist, which I anticipated would throw light on management training. My paper "Emotional Pain in Learning" describes the nature of the work on emotions that psychotherapists do during their training and explains why they see this work as important. See Emotional Pain in Learning

Several of the reasons psychotherapists described for working with feelings apply directly to the manager's situation. They reported that they gained:

- Support for and release from the feelings (anger, guilt, shame, etc.) that drained their energy and affected their ability to function.
- The ability to convert their emotions into an articulate language which helped them develop the concepts they needed to understand the situations they encountered and to be less hostage to their emotions.
- The ability to distinguish their own emotional issues from their client's. e.g. Are they empathizing with the client or are they projecting their own feelings on to the client?

With little guidance in managing painful emotions, managers are handicapped in gaining fluency with the feelings their work relationships stimulate in them. They often fall back onto gut reactions and dysfunctional attitudes and models for their roles. For instance, the first impulse of the manager mentioned at the opening of this paper was to retaliate in some way. Another manager worked with a deputy who disagreed with a number of her policies and approaches. She experienced his criticisms as a personal attack. At one point, he sent out a memo with alternative suggestions for a particular project. The manager was offended, felt that the deputy had not shown her the respect due to her, and responded with a letter of reprimand. He lodged a formal complaint of harassment as a result.

Negative emotions are part of a manager's experience, and the way he or she handles them is critical to success. Organizations can help their management trainees through:

- accepting and supporting trainees' emotional experience.
- building time for personal development into training programs,
- providing regular supervision of case material from the trainee's practice.

Provision of this support can be a straightforward matter. One international corporation provides a leadership development program that helps its managers deal with the emotional stresses of their roles. Professional coaching helped in the two examples given earlier. Coaching groups for managers are another useful approach.

Unfortunately the dominant ideology within corporations denies the significance of emotions in management learning. There have been some shifts in this ideology in recent years as companies have recognized the need to support managers who lose their jobs with downsizing and communities understand that victims of disasters need counseling and other emotional support. However, the overarching belief remains that emotions do not matter in management learning. As a consequence much that has been learned about professional development in the field of psychotherapy is excluded from or pushed to the margins of the management training discourse.

Reference

Nichol, B., (1997), Emotional Pain in Learning: Applying Group-analytic Experience in Non-clinical Fields. *Group Analysis*, Vol. 30, 93-105.

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