A training week on organisational development with NGO professionals in Africa (December 2014): Facilitating a learning process to help people and organisations transition from authority-based to collaboration (in cultures where the use of power over, threat and violence is wide spread).
by Vérène Nicolas

Last December, I was invited to teach again on the Training for Transformation diploma course in Kleinmond, a small coastal town of the Western Cape in South Africa and felt moved to write this report to share my learning with peers in the NVC community.

I envision this report to feed into the existent conversation as to how NVC can contribute to social change and what choices we might make, as trainers, when approaching organisations to facilitate change.

To briefly set the scene, the Training for Transformation course aims to train Non-Profit and Church professionals to become facilitators and develop critical consciousness amongst local communities and people in poverty[1] worldwide (most participants are from the global South). Many years ago, I was a student on the course. I have regularly been invited to facilitate modules these past 10 years, initially on issues of ecology and culture, then on how to handle conflict and most recently on organisational development (O.D.).

This year's cohort attracted 30 or so people from 12 countries of Africa. Most of them work in the non-profit sector or in faith communities, supporting youth, women and girls, people with HIV/aids, peasant farmers, and local communities.

My input took place over 5 days. The second part of the report details what I did with the group (activities I facilitated, models I used etc.). In what follows, I outline *what I learnt and what I am celebrating* from that week:

The key insight I gained from teaching this material is that, in my opinion, we often teach Nonviolent Communication in a context where participants haven't taken the full measure of how much is stacked up against compassion and collaboration in our society. As a result, NVC is learnt as a tool for self-connection, healing and communication but rarely as a radical methodology for organisational and societal transformation. I also wonder whether more people would be encouraged to put the effort in studying NVC if they had a different understanding of how important it was to shift from authority-based to collaboration at all levels of society. What I found in South Africa is that people were so shocked to discover how much they, their organisation and their wider

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[1] The course was created by Anne Hope and Sally Timmel in the 1970s in Kenya. They were strongly inspired by Brazilian Educator Paulo Freire. His radically different approach to adult education aims to help people "read their reality and write their own history", and motivates them to action that transforms their life situations. For more, see http://www.grailprogrammes.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4&Itemid=2

culture operate from the authority-based paradigm (with its attributes of fear, mistrust and violence), that they got really interested to learn how to embody collaboration.

The exploration of power and privilege that we did half way through the week was a big part of feeding that hunger. It was a new territory for everyone and got them stretched, searching and inspired. Most of these people have structural power (due to their relative wealth as professionals, as well as their position within organisations and/or ethnic origin). It became clear for example, that many of the traits they despised in their managers, were traits they had themselves – in particular when relating to 'subordinates'. Some role-plays had a sobering and awakening impact on some of them.

I would have needed another 3-4 days to properly introduce NVC as a tool for dialogue and self-connection. I promised to support participants in accessing training or training material if they got in touch with me later. A couple of people from Zimbabwe have been in touch since the training, asking for support (coaching, training etc.).

This experience has left me inspired to change the way I share NVC in organisations. In the past, after exploring participants' challenges, I usually dived into sharing the skills and principles of dialogue and self-empathy. Reflecting on my South African experience, I now understand better why I've often felt as though what I was doing wasn't 'sticking' e.g. I found that participants were interested in what I was sharing and engaged with the material but wouldn't continue their practice beyond our training sessions. Furthermore, I have heard of only one team (amongst the many I've worked with in one particular organisation) radically changing their way of relating to one another and working with others around them. There may be many reasons for this which I am still exploring, including my facilitation style and level of experience in sharing NVC.

Now, my intention is to try to first engage participants in a conversation about their organisation's culture and structures, the set of beliefs that underpin them and the impact those might have on human dynamics and working practices. I want to use Marshall's "Four Spheres" model (see below) to trigger their curiosity and reflect on what gets in the way of collaboration and trust in their organisation, as well as what they could build on to support collaboration. From then on, we could learn specific practices such as dialogue, feedback giving and receiving, convergent facilitation etc. so as to transition to a collaborative model, and explore the kind of structures that would support it.

I have only had one opportunity so far to experiment with these ideas. It's too early to know the impact but I am excited to see what unfolds.

Part 2 - A detailed outline of what I did with the group:

1. Checking-in on the first day

So far on the course, what have given you hope and energy for your life and work?

2. Objectives I defined for the week:
- o To set Organisational Development within a wider vision of transformation;
- o To learn a language and tools to support change in your organisation and wider;
- o To learn maps and models that will help you navigate this field and set you off on a life-long learning journey;
- o To put yourself at the centre of organisational change;
- o To identify leverage points within your organisation and set a strategic plan;
- o To start taking self-care seriously;

3. Surfacing challenges that people face as regards to their organisation:

What prevents you from feeling joy at work or act in integrity with your values as often as you want to?
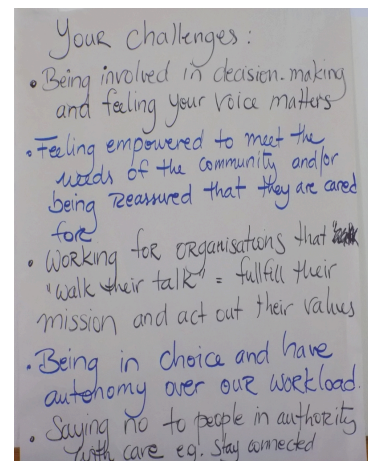
4. Setting O.D. within a bigger vision of transformation: Input on Marshall's "Transitioning from Authority-based to Collaborative Societies" model[2];

I gave an input on Marshall's "4 Spheres" model (documented by Miki), highlighting the four elements that interrelate and form a spectrum from authority-based to collaborative societies: 1. The *"Story"*: theory or set of beliefs that we have about human nature, 2. *Institutions* and organisations this theory leads to, 3. The *education system* that plays a critical role in all societies and 4. What *human behaviour* is to be witnessed as a result of it. Participants were given a handout created by Miki to explore questions and share in small groups.

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[2] See Miki Kashtan's forthcoming book – *Reweaving our Human Fabric* – due to be published soon.
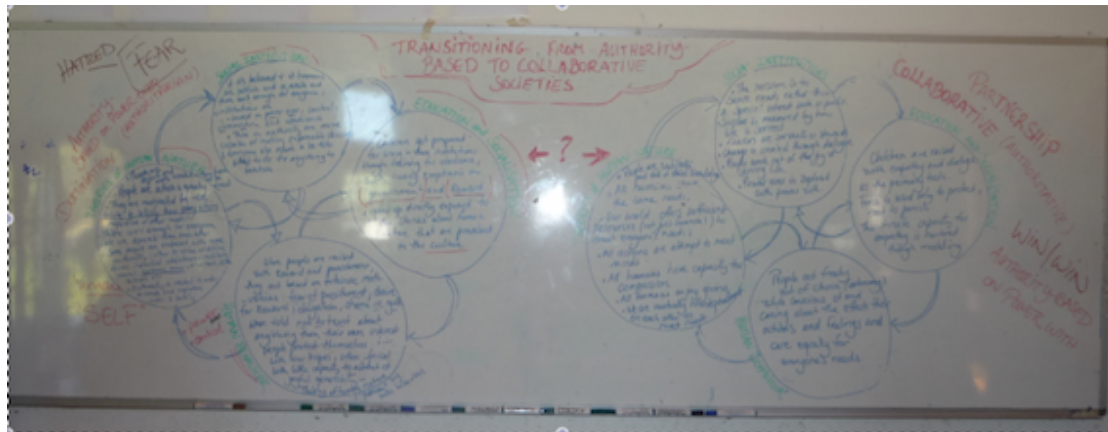
Ex of questions: what were some of the elements of the Story about Human Nature that you grew up with and what are the consequences of this story for the possibility of creating a world that works for all? Name some of the policies, structures, or actions of your organisation? In what way do those policies, structures, or actions reflect an authority-based structure? In which ways might they embody the collaborative paradigm?

5. Understanding the building blocks of organisational functioning: Input based on Miki's handout: Organisational Literacy, Needs and Collaboration.

Participants engaged in a conversation on how their organisation was fairing as regards to each building block defined by Miki (shared vision, decision-making, information flow, feedback loops, conflict resolution, resource allocation, values) and were introduced to the two key building blocks distinguishing collaborative organisations from those still mainly rooted in the domination paradigm: use of power and individual and team wellbeing.

6. A deeper exploration of power based on another of Miki's handout: Power, Resources and Choices.

1. *Think of at least 2 situations where you have structural power in your life (due to age, position, wealth, ethnic belonging, gender etc.).*
2. *How do you normally use this power? Would you say it's power over or power with* [definitions of power, power over and power with were written on the board]*? What impact does it have on you and others around you?*
3. *Think of 2 situations where you don't have structural power in your life. What choices do you make in relation to not having structural power? How do you navigate these situations?*
4. *What is the impact of the use of structural power and power over on your organisational culture and on the work done by your organisation?*

7. Transitioning from authority-based to collaborative relationships and communication

Brainstorm: *what are the characteristics of communication that's embedded in the power over paradigm? What are characteristics of communication embedded in the power with paradigm?*

Think of a situation that was embedded in the domination paradigm. *Make a picture of what was happening in your body, write down feeling words, thoughts in your head and maybe words that you spoke.*

Input on the characteristics of Jackal language – blame, judgements, no choice etc.

Then remember a situation embedded in the partnership paradigm or imagine how communication would be like in this paradigm. *Make a picture of what was happening or would happen in your body, write down feeling words and thoughts that were or would need to be in your mind for this conversation to happen? What words did you or would imagine speaking?*

8. Exploring communication further

In small groups, role-play a situation (amongst the various situations that were voiced by participants during the week) from the perspective of domination – one person will use power over. The others will respond in submission or rebellion mode. Try to use some of the categories of alienating language – blame, no choice, judgements, demands etc.

Input on the key model of Nonviolent Communication – using character with head ("Story"), heart (feelings), gut (needs), legs/arms (strategies), and starting with the key thought that need to be in their mind when anchored in this paradigm: Get curious, not furious. Introduction to Giraffe and Jackal symbolism.

Back in their small groups, identify the feelings and needs of each character in the situation. Role-play the same situation (with one character anchored in partnership mode) and following those six key principles.

- Let go of your attachment to outcomes and stay open to creative solutions emerging from the dialogue;
- Find common ground by identifying all the needs present in the situation;
- The solutions we find or agreements we make need to work for everyone;
- The aim is not to win (get what you want) or even to agree. The aim is to stay in connection (i.e. to see the humanity of the other person).
- Inquiring into the 'yes' behind the 'no' helps understand what is important to the other person and find solutions that'll work for them and me.
- When people feel heard and trust their voice matters, they are more willing to shift.

9. Exploration of their organisational challenges

Using Miki's dialogue and role-play model (inspired by her recent Art and Craft of dialogue course), we explored various situations and extracted key principles of collaboration.

A concluding comment on role-modelling collaboration…

I took any opportunity during our sessions to unearth principles of collaboration and made a list of them. This meant that by the end of the week, although we didn't have much time to explore the actual mechanics of how to transition into partnership mode, participants had a philosophical base on which to stand. I believe this played a key role in triggering a kind of hunger to find out how to live life and build organisations according to the partnership paradigm.

Also, I used the Convergent Facilitation approach to role model collaborative decision making as often as I could. Twice during the week, we explored a live and difficult decision in the group. After going through the decision process, we harvested what we'd learnt about collaborative decision-making. Some powerful learning happened in this space, especially what it meant to hold everyone's needs preciously. I was very satisfied with the way this particular learning happened – through a real situation in the group, a lot of emotions in finding a solution and thanks to my ability to hold the process in as close to truly collaborative as I could. Considering I didn't have a lot of experience in Convergent Facilitation, I was very pleased to have had the courage to go for it. I made mistakes along the way. I found they didn't get in the way of learning and trust.

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To finish, a few words about myself:

I am based in Glasgow, Scotland and of French origins. I have recently become certified. A lot of my work is taking place in organisations or with teams working alongside people in poverty (faith and voluntary organisations at home and abroad). I am deeply interested in the dynamics of violence and domination in our society and how to create systemic change. For this reason, I have found inspiration in Nonviolent Communication (Marshall's booklet on NVC and Social Change was the hook). As this report will have made obvious, I also find a lot of inspiration in Miki's work.

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