

BEYOND STICKY: MAKING PROGRESS IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT & OD **Report of an Ideas Unlimited open workshop (27 April 2017, London)**

INTRODUCTION

Getting leadership development and organisation development work off the ground can be sticky. The politics of multiple stakeholders and vested interests, unclear decision rights and the plain fact of not being able to know everything before starting all create their own treacle.

A lot of our work at Ideas Unlimited involves developing progressive leadership development and OD practices that work in the VUCA world we all now inhabit. So we invited senior HR and development people in client organisations to gather and explore the 'stickiness' and how to make progress in leadership development and OD in these very treacle-y times.

THE WORKSHOP

The group consisted of 16 people, representing the following disciplines and organisations:

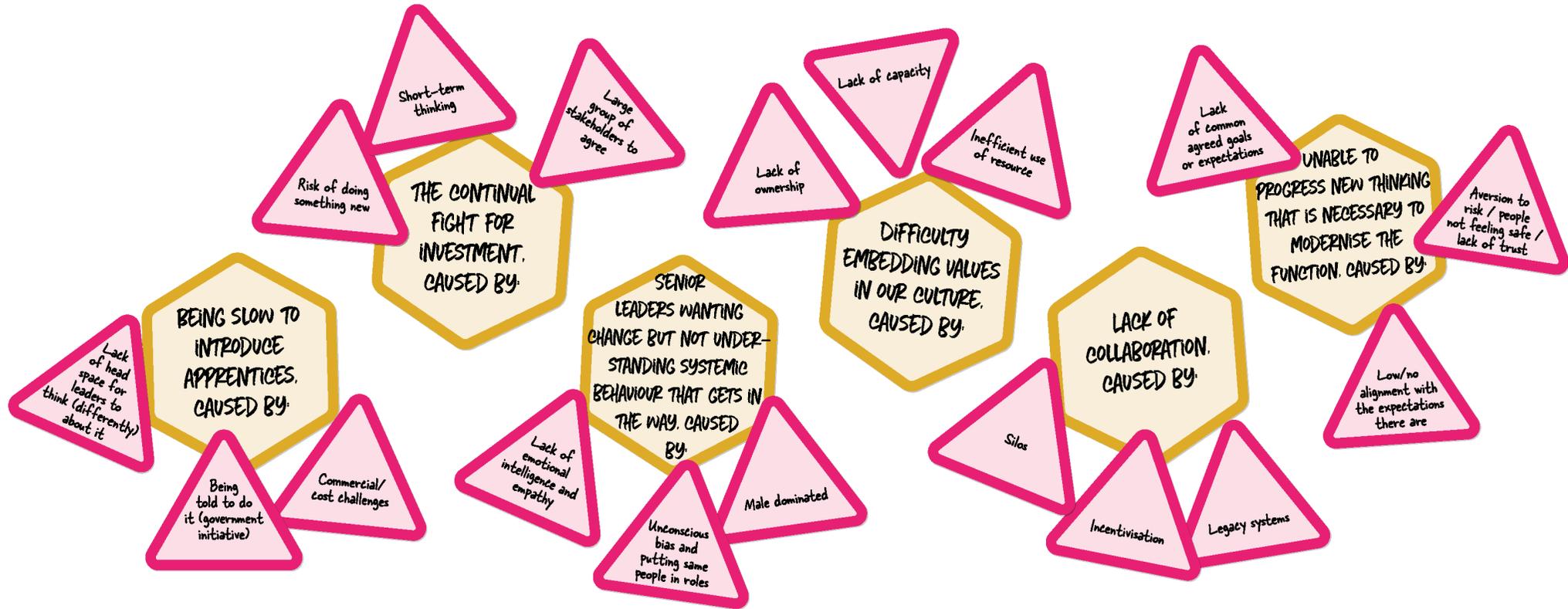
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|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| HR | BAE Systems |
| Organisation development | NHS |
| Leadership development | Bayer |
| Talent management | BP |
| Performance improvement | Deloitte |
| Communications | HSBC |
| Culture | Lloyds Banking Group |
| Change | Network Rail |
| | RBS |
| | The Co-operative Bank |

We set out to:

- Explore how each member of the group was experiencing stickiness in their work
- Understand better what's causing it, and
- Develop and share ideas about how to resolve or move through it.

'Depreciative Inquiry'

To call experiences to mind (and body), we allowed ourselves a moment of 'Depreciative Inquiry', taking it in turns to be interviewed about our lived experience of stickiness – a deep dive into a particular instance, its causes and effects. Examples included:



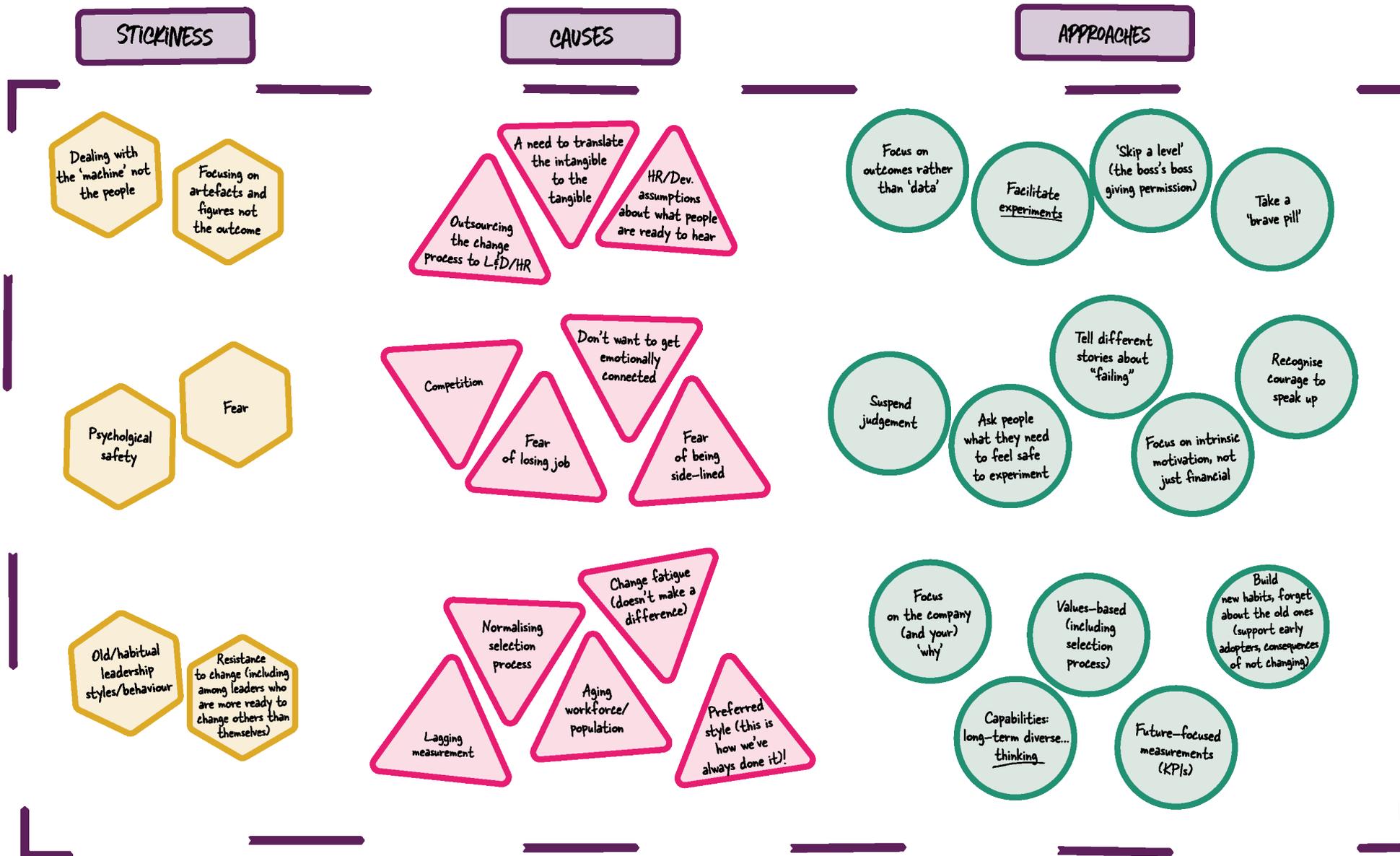
Types of stickiness

Immersing ourselves in a 'wallfull' of these and many other examples, we looked for patterns and spotted a number of different types/categories of stickiness:



Causes and solutions

Finally, small groups picked a type of stickiness to explore further by considering its particular causes and sharing experiences or ideas about how to resolve or move through it.



COMMENTARY (1) What's going on: big themes

Anxiety and fear

These can feel like dangerous words to say out loud in organisations, but there does seem to be a great deal of anxiety and fear in day-to-day organisational life. They don't manifest themselves as obvious physical or psychological symptoms but as avoidance: avoidance of making decisions, avoidance of openness about feeling uncertainty and doubt, avoidance of responsibility, avoidance of trusting others (a manifestation of not feeling trusted oneself or trusting oneself?) and avoidance of the discomfort of learning. These form quite a pool of treacle just on their own!

Power

Perhaps related to fear, as described above, people's sources of power are under threat. 'Expertise', as a source of power, in particular feels like it is besieged by the impossibility of 'knowing' the 'right' answer(s) to development problems. And so, many organisational experts are uncomfortable with approaches that are *not* dependent on their expertise. This leads to the seeking of increased amounts of data, justifications, case material, evidence etc. What makes this so tricky to respond to is that it is almost impossible to have evidence to support approaches that are often about *learning what will work*. Paradoxically, evidence is far easier to come by for prescriptive approaches which feel less and less likely to create sustainable solutions.

The threat of uncertainty to power is also manifested as over zealous gatekeeping. Participants described the difficulty in accessing senior leaders, who were kept from them by others who seemed keen to protect and keep for themselves any time and attention of senior leaders that they were able to get. This was also described as an individual's Political Capital.

Unfamiliarity with methods for working in Uncertainty

(as well as in the V,C and A of VUCA)... It is hard to make progress in development because of a mismatch between established approaches to traditional development, many of which have an education and training pedigree, and current frequently unclear and

complex circumstances and webs of issues. In these conditions mainstream large scale programmes or solutions feel inappropriate, depending as they do on a belief in there being a single solution, a single set of programme content, one pattern of development requirements etc.

Inappropriate (outdated!) organisational forms, designs and habits

Participants described an expediency and a lack of time and space to think through options fully. The expediency does not however feel as if it is creating productive pace, more like it causes a lack of attention to critical issues and then leads to reworking later. There seems to be an unhealthy addiction to speed and action (see *Anxiety and fear*, above) and a discomfort with thinking things through thoroughly or rigorously enough. It sounded as if it is unpopular to suggest that going slower to begin with could enable solutions to be created that would be delivered faster overall.

Focusing on organisational artefacts rather than people and outcomes was also described. This meant the creation of systems, processes, documents, lists (e.g. of competencies, values, behaviours etc) whether or not they have ever been seen effectively to cause the change or development required. This may again be related to avoidance: it's a lot less messy and awkward to be analytical and reductive in the face of hydra-headed organisational challenges.

The defence of professional territories also seemed to be on the increase – resulting in the large numbers of people now expecting to 'collaborate' on a piece of development work. The word collaborate appears here in inverted commas as what was described is not always an authentic coming together to co-design, pool resources, knowledge, access etc, but the need to be involved to ensure that 'we' (whoever we are in this case) get a look in, get our needs met, are influencing the outcome that we want. Organisational politics in other words.

COMMENTARY (2) Different Approaches

Seeing it, calling it out and overcoming it are all part of the work

The all too common stickiness, when trying to bring about movement in our organisations, is paradoxically both (a) unhealthily normalised into the day-to-day, such that we don't see and question it enough, and yet is also (b) something we need to recognise that we have to overcome, not *before* we can do our work but as *part* of doing our work. So on the one hand we can collaborate with the stickiness by being "in it" and/or we can call attention to it, name it and co-opt our colleagues into different approaches in our intent to render the treacle less viscous!

Outcomes rather than data

What we describe as evidence and indicators of the lived-experience of people rather than reductive numeric measurements. In practice this means looking for observable and reported differences in how people experience their workplace, manager etc. The reason this shift matters is that it demands the design of interventions that really do what they were intended to do. This is then in contrast to numerical measures, such as Net Promoter Scores, which are able to be 'gamed'. Organisations have also become accustomed to incremental movement in numerical data being sufficient to consider a job 'done' when in fact it has only been tinkered with.

Intrinsic motivators

Being clear on a more meaningful 'why' people may want to do something rather than focusing on what incentive (extrinsic motivator) is required to move them. This also helps in suppressing politics and encourages the creation of authentic alignment and collaboration.

Reframing what it means to be unsuccessful

This requires a new view of mistakes and failures as part of learning and evolving new practice. Despite a few decades of espousing the need to "...fail fast" "...recognise well thought through mistakes" "...encourage experiments and prototyping" there is little evidence that this is anywhere close to being a new norm in development. Pilot programmes are much more common, but they are more often than not still required to be the first run of the absolute solution. This is more like 'snagging' of a new house than building a Minimum Viable Product (of product development and Lean/Agile approaches) from which to learn and revisit the building process. The required practice here is creating sufficient psychological safety for experimenting and prototyping. This in turn requires a more sophisticated relationship with stakeholders, such that simple short term pleasing is displaced by a longer term partnership in successful and ongoing adaptation and reinvention in the workplace.

Courage

At the heart of this dimension is the confidence of HR and development practitioners. Getting unstuck seems to require individuals with a confidence in their own employability and an identity that is vested in impact, i.e. over and above our identity as technical experts that can otherwise become out-dated. Or perhaps it requires a different kind of expertise; the expert ability to know how to convene stakeholders and explore and innovate what is required by way of solutions, rather than knowing definitively what the answer is. A belief in ones own employability removes the fear of making waves or being seen as challenging. But it doesn't negate the responsibility to act with sufficient finesse, tact and diplomacy to take stakeholders with us, and not alienate them.

IF YOU'VE BEEN AFFECTED BY THE ISSUES IN THIS REPORT...

Much of Ideas Unlimited's work over the last seven-years (of our twenty-year history) has been in helping organisations to navigate their swollen rivers of treacle and thick forests of stickiness. Over this time we have developed a number of approaches that are designed to:

- Provide simple and clear development design processes that help you to move through the uncertainty and complexity
- Use inquiry and exploration as leadership and management development vehicles for participants, enabling leaders and managers to develop the skills required to make positive progress through an increasingly VUCA world
- Incorporate the most relevant and valuable practices of Agile and Lean working into leadership and management development
- Practice Applied Leadership Development (ALD), our method for using the real and substantial strategic business challenges of the organisation as the development vehicles for leadership and management practice

If you'd like to hear more about any or all of these, contact:

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