

Abstract

Regression & Reparation – Changing Spatial and Psychic Walls – A Case Study

by Joanna Stuart and Rob Ryan

This paper describes an intervention in three early childhood education and care centres (hubs) in a local government organisation ('City Council'), and proposes hypotheses about the impact of organisational changes on the workers' experiences of the shifting physical and psychic walls.

The case study uses a psychoanalytic framework to analyse the changes, it examines the organisational roles and relationships, the challenges involved in creating adequate psychic and physical workspaces, the effects of dependency and challenged leadership, and the impact of insufficient attention being given to transitional processes.

We were engaged to conduct an organisational culture diagnosis of the hubs which provide long day care, kindergarten and maternal & child health services, and have a total of more than 150 staff. They had been established recently and four pre-existing smaller centres were decommissioned, with many staff moving into the three new large hubs.

In an initial contracting meeting, the client (service manager) described his mental model of the services as: *'In the past, we were running four small corner stores, now we are running three large supermarkets – in my view, this is no exaggeration.'*

For us there were interesting implications regarding newly built walls and changing psychic walls implicit in his mental model.

In late 2018 management initiated the move of nine staff to different rooms. The rationale was unclear to many staff - high anxiety, persecution and paranoia were rife. Staff morale plummeted, with significant catastrophizing and acting-out.

We conducted a cultural diagnosis involving thirteen staff focus groups (107 staff) and interviews with six leaders. We utilized role drawings and group discussions as the initial means of accessing unconscious thoughts and feelings.

Relevant psychoanalytic concepts included the recognition of paranoid schizoid behaviour, the absence of sufficient holding mechanisms, diminution of role clarity and relatedness, and the importance of acknowledging the sentient system. In addition, we believe, there was inadequate understanding of role authority and accountability as the psychic walls became less permeable.

We hypothesise that we provided a transitional object which enabled the issues to be worked through and enabled the depressive position, whereby reparation was then possible.

The lack of acknowledgement of the sentient system had significant implications for the hubs, particularly as we believe that the provision of high quality child education services is dependent on strong emotional engagement.

City Council built multiple, architecturally attractive structural walls but hadn't realised the profound significance of the emotionally bounded walls.

We believe that the possible implications of this study for other organisations are significant. In an era where the impact of early years education on later life is now seen as highly predictive, it is important to better understand the critical success factors.

The Case Study also raises broader questions about the need for holistic and well-planned transitional processes, particularly in human service organisations.

Authors' brief bios

Joanna Stuart

Joanna supports the emergence of energy, insights, clarity and alignment with her client organisations, as Director of Artemis Consulting Pty Ltd, based in Melbourne, Australia. Over the past 20 years Joanna has worked psychodynamically with individuals and groups on organisation analysis, strategy, role definition, reflection of individual and organisational dynamics, enhanced communication, and leadership. Achievements include increased organisational effectiveness, enhanced leadership and performance management capacity, clarity of strategic intent, organisational goals, and intentional cultural change.

Professional qualifications include a Master of Business (Organisation Change); Bachelor of Social Sciences; Certificate IV Counselling (Drug & Alcohol); IECL Executive Coach; AISA Fellowship (Australian Institute of SocioAnalysis) and MBTI Accreditation. Previously an active member of the Australian Institute of Socio-Analysis and a current member of International Society for Psychoanalytic Study of Organisations (ISPSO).

Rob Ryan

Rob Ryan is an experienced psychoanalytic consultant and the Director of wisdom+work – a boutique consulting firm based in Melbourne, Australia. It provides consulting services in team and leadership development, strategic planning and evaluation, organisation and service reviews, governance and coaching in government, business and not-for-profit sectors. Rob is also a senior associate of NIODA Consulting and an accredited Analytic-Network coach.

In his twenty-three years of working with organisations and individuals, Rob has worked creatively and successfully, consulting to a wide range of clients in leadership, transitions and change management.

He has supported many organisations in reviewing and developing their roles, structures and processes; he has coached many leaders and has also held elected leadership roles in many not-for-profit organisations. Currently this includes the roles of Administrative Director of ISPSO and regional co-convenor for ISPSO in Australia.