Beyond Undiscussables? Why surfacing undiscussables in working groups is more important than ever.

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Abstract

Decades ago Chris Argyris made famous the notion of 'undiscussables'. He defined them as topics that were avoided by groups, where their avoidance was also not discussed (Argyris, 1986, 1990). This paper argues that the problem of undiscussables remains a major obstacle to organizational learning, especially given our emerging understanding of collective learning. It presents recently published research (Donovan, 2011) relating to identifying undiscussables and innovative ways of surfacing and managing them.

While 'undiscussables' might be old news, it's also now very current. The nature of learning and becoming is increasingly understood to be a social phenomena, richly linked to the dynamic of the groups in which we live and work (Iverson, 2011; Stacey, 2003). The traditional Human Resources (HR) model of individuals learning through acquisition, in apolitical situations, is being replaced by concepts of collectives learning in complex, contradictory contexts textured by intricate power relations (Fenwick, 2010). At the same time, organizational learning is said be located at the very fold between order and chaos, between predictability and novelty, a place in 'tension' (Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes,

2005). This more nuanced, practice based understanding of learning places center stage the dynamic of the group, where 'undiscussables' are powerful in shaping that dynamic. In addition, and perhaps not surprisingly, undiscussables have also been found to be located close to the most critical business issues for executive groups (Donovan, 2011).

Unfortunately, undiscussables by nature remain mostly invisible, providing at best only subtle signs of their presence. Argyris's 'fancy footwork' remains for most an elusive phrase. It is argued that for many groups, working to surface undiscussables remains a singularly potent strategy to facilitate learning and to increase their agency. Mindell (2000, 2002), through his conceptualization of 'hot spots' provides practical help in this task, as does Donovan (2011) with his three conversational patterns that accompany avoidance of some more threatening topic. This paper concludes by unfolding these practical strategies to surface undiscussables and consequently facilitate learning and agency.

Introduction

The average business meeting has a bad reputation (Wilkinson, 2005). A chorus of authors both from academia and management traditions has commented on the disappointing and frustrating experience of executives in their everyday meeting (Schwarz, 2002; Welton, 2005; Wilkinson, 2005). Petz (2011) reports that a recent USA Today questionnaire showed that respondents found 49% of office meetings be a waste of time. That finding presents no personal surprise based on my own experience as a corporate facilitator and consultant over the last 12 years or so.

While the problem with meetings is undoubtedly multifactorial, Chris Argyris, who many consider the father of modern organisational development, advocated that a central problem with executive meetings was the presence of 'non-discussables', that is, those things thought or felt in a conversation on a threatening topic but not said (Argyris, 1978, 1986, 1990, 1993). This was a term he coined, and which later became known as undiscussables.

Now, decades later, the problem is taking on new dimension. Executive meetings, in our increasingly networked and collaborative world, are now understood to be a critical site for generating learning and getting work done, where learning is central to knowing the right work to do. Learning theorists have proposed a migration away from the traditional focus on the individual learning through acquisition, to a collective, practice based understanding of how learning actually works. Therefore, we now understand that meetings, and working together, are a critical site for organisational learning. In other words, the learning that for decades has been prized as the main strategy to preserve our companies is in good part reliant on the everyday business meeting. The trouble is, commonly those business meetings suffer from the presence of undiscussables, and the resultant dynamic is resistant to learning. Consequently, undiscussables are now understood to have more far-reaching implications than ever.

Building understanding about how undiscussables work, why they are so important, and how they can be identified and surfaced remains a top priority for relevant practitioners, researchers and business executives alike. This paper

attempts to contribute to that understanding by reviewing the latest research, including that published by the author, and distilling practical, actionable strategies.

How do 'undiscussables' work?

It was Chris Argyris who first coined the term non-discussables, which later became known as undiscussables. His writing was centrally located in the field of Management Studies, with an emphasis on organizational learning. He contended that an organization's inability to address issues that might create threat or embarrassment creates non-discussables and that they, in turn, lead to managerial mediocrity, poor market performance and malaise (Argyris, 1995). In other words, non-discussables prevents learning, and results in poorly conceived decisions. Conversely, as its leaders learn to engage in conversations that address these "non-discussables", they increase their ability to create robust conversations, thoroughly interrogate various strategies, create organizational learning and ultimately make effective decisions. Argyris also maintained that the ability to do this is more necessary in a world becomingly increasingly complex (Argyris, 2003).

With the intention to shed light on how organizational defensiveness actually works, Argyris explains that when issues emerge that prompt feelings of being threatened or embarrassed, groups tend to navigate around the issue or "cover up". Not only that, they do not discuss that they are avoiding the issue and in doing so, cover up the "cover up". This strategy has the effect of sealing the original contentious issue away from the

groups' interactions and therefore ensuring that problematic decisions required by the group will not be dealt with directly. He went on to say the groups' behaviour in navigating around the contentious issue is in fact "skillful" since it is produced in milliseconds, is spontaneous, automatic and unrehearsed. For this reason, he calls it "skilled incompetence" because it produces what they do not intend (mediocre managerial stewardship) and they do so repeatedly, even though no one is forcing them. Argyris explains that this "fancy footwork" which enables the group to avoid contentious issues leads to malaise within the organization as the employees become more and more non-questioning or challenging about the behaviour of the organizational groups to which they belong (1990).

Learning in Organisations.

There seems little doubt that for organisations to succeed, and for them to play their role in creating a more just and sustainable world, they must learn. Yet, the literature relating to organisational learning is complex, contradictory and contested. Indeed, one of the main points of agreement is that the field lacks cohesive, unitary definitions to bind it (Crossan, H., & White, 1999; Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999; Tsang, 1997). Interestingly, it is not even agreed that these contradictions are a bad thing. Clegg et al (2005) call for an acceptance of the divergence and inconsistencies within the field, suggesting they are an important part of the field continuing to learn.

In the 1990's, two broad streams of writing within this field operated side by side, and largely independently (Garavan & McCarthy, 2008; Rebelo & Gomes,

2008; Tsang, 1997). One stream related to the Learning Organisation, and was largely prescriptive, normative and intended for business people and HR professionals. The second related to organisational learning, and was focused on how learning actually happens in organisations. It was primarily academics and researchers who participated in this second stream.

By the end of the 1990's the flow of these streams started to wane, especially the one relating to the Learning Organisation. This coincided with an increasing number of critical reviews and reflections (Belasco, 1998; Clegg, et al., 2005; Fenwick, 2001; Stacey, 2003). These authors advocated that to use 'the learning organisation' language was to anthropomorphise something highly elusive, let alone inanimate. In addition, Fenwick (2001) says of the literature that upholds the learning organisation ideal;

"The organisation is thus construed as a unitary, definable, intelligent entity. It is not, nor is it stable and bounded....how can this fluctuating combination of sub-groups be totalized as a single, monolithic organism that somehow 'learns' and has memory?" (p78).

Consistent with the character of this field, Ortenblad (2005) gave a lively defense for the notion of organisational learning in his article "Of-course Organisations can learn!" by advocating that analysis at the individual level should not be done in exclusion to analysis at the organisational level.

While controversy regarding the learning organisation concept emerged, the concepts of collective learning seem to have steadily gained weight over the last few years and decades. Interestingly, even those who expressed doubt (sometimes cynicism) about the concept of the learning organisation seem convinced that individuals do not learn in isolation. While the original theories of organisational learning centralised the notion of individual learning (Elkjaer, 1999), recent literature has framed individual learning as insufficient as a means to create organisational learning and change (Aslam, T., Tanveer, Khan, & Shabbir, 2011; Garavan & McCarthy, 2008; Sessa & London, 2006; Shani & Dochery, 2003). Most commonly the individual, group and organisational learning are shown or implied to be nested circles, indicating systems within systems, each at different levels. Sessa and London (2006) said, "Organizational learning builds upon group learning, which is dependent on individual learning. Yet group learning is more than the learning of individuals in the group, and organizational learning is more than the patterns of behaviour established by groups in the organization" (p6).

Stacey (2003), who supported the fundamental notion of learning being social, looked to contribute a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between individual and group learning than the nested circles image suggested. Rather than place the collectives at some higher level than the individual, he maintains the individual and group arise together, and at the same time. Individuals form the social, while being formed by it. He maintained they are constitutive of each other and that interdependent individuals learn in the context of their exchanges with each other, that is, the collective. Consequently, he advocated that while

learning was indeed social, the collective did not represent a higher system to the individual.

While this somewhat esoteric discussion about learning may create some interest, the notion that learning is basically a social affair, embedded in practice as we work together, has taken root (Elkjaer, 1999; Fenwick, 2010; Garavan & McCarthy, 2008; Iverson, 2011). This understanding stands somewhat contrary to the concerning observation that Human Resource Development literature bucks this trend by continuing to feature the traditional concepts of learning as individual acquisition (Fenwick 2010). Nevertheless, with this more collective understanding of learning comes the acknowledgement that it is deeply vested in the political forces that shape the social space. Power relations that shape and reshape the exchanges between workers equally inform the learning and action between them. These power relations are subtle, complex and changing and reflect not only the immediate members of the collective in question, but also of some who exercise power outside the group.

While locating learning in the collective obviously increases the complexity of the undertaking, Clegg et al (2005) moves to deepen that complexity by arguing that learning in organisations resides in places of ambiguity, uncertainty and the vulnerability of unknowingness. He also describes the learning journey to be straddling method and planned structure on one side and haphazard meandering without clear direction on the other. Consequently, to facilitate learning it is required that "learning becomes the task of providing room for multiple voices and creating openings for those voices" and "organisational learning can evolve

through decentralised power…where there is no decentralised power, there is no organisational learning" (p149).

Undiscussables as a powerfully limiting factor in organisational learning

Undiscussables may be the most obvious (if indeed they ever are obvious) symptom of a power imbalance in a collective. Indeed, they give immediate evidence that the "multiple voices and openings for those voices" referred to earlier, that are required for learning, is not being facilitated. In such a context, one or more in a group may not experience the freedom and agency to express their concerns or reflections on a particular topic, but instead avoid the topic in question and withhold their thoughts and feelings. The multiplicity of voices is reduced, undiscussables generated and learning limited.

Importantly, and perhaps not surprisingly, at least one recent Action Research study found that undiscussable topics in the senior executive group studied overlapped with some of the most pressing strategic concerns for the organisation (Donovan 2011). Placing those topics beyond the reach of the collective shielded them from the collective interrogation, critical reflection and planning that might be expected of the senior team on matters of import. Consequently, without the power balancing effect of open exchanges on the topic, existing imbalanced power relations became entrenched. Practically speaking, this was evidenced in the practice of just one or two from the senior team making important organisational decisions outside the meeting. The groups capacity to learn by evaluating the effect of action previously taken, consider their assumptions that

they may be bringing to those reflections, and plan subsequent action, was hamstrung. Learning in those important areas was disabled.

Interestingly, Fenwick (2001) says one of the topics that may suffer from the 'cover up' of undiscussables is the topic of organisational learning itself. She said that questions including, what does organisational learning value, what kind of learning is invisible to the organisation and therefore deprioritised, how has learning become seconded by the priority of profits, and how is it being used to support existing imbalanced power relations are usually overlooked or avoided by managers and educators.

Practical approaches to working with undiscussables

Given the speed and complexity of interactions that occur in most executive meetings, practical assistance to executives and practitioners in helping them remain alert to the potential presence of important undiscussables is of value. Argyris provided some foundational approaches which will be discussed, followed by the more recent methodologies offered by Mindell and Donovan.

Argyris, in addition to his ground-breaking work defining undiscussables also provided practical means of working with them. Probably his most well known technique was the 'left hand column (LHC) exercise (Noonan, 2007; Senge, LKleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994) Participants were invited to identify a somewhat uncomfortable conversation (ideally with someone in their team) and write down the spoken dialogue on the right hand side of the page and their related withheld thoughts and feelings on the left hand side. Individuals were then

invited to share their 'left hand column' with the group. He provides evidence that this tool, when mixed with his considerable interrogative ability can be successful in facilitating new conversations in topics previously avoided.

In my own professional experience however, this approach can have mixed success. In some cases, participants may not feel they have a sufficient sense of safety, or strong enough permission to speak, despite the invitation via the LHC exercise. In other words, simply being asked to speak what was previously withheld, after writing it on a page, may not be adequate to re-address the power imbalance that generated the undiscussable in the first place. In such cases the additional assistance offered by Mindell and Donovan may be of value.

Mindell (2000, 2002, 2010) was an early member of a growing group of researchers and authors who have applied concepts from complexity sciences to organisational development (Davis & Sumara, 2006; Karpiak, 2000). As theoretical physicist, he may be more credible in doing so than some. As part of his conceptualizations Mindell describes groups as generating a 'field'. He described this 'field' as having a self-organizing property that supports the realization of various 'roles'. The roles generated by the field are balanced, that is, polarities of each role exist in the field. For example, where one particular view on a topic exists within the group, the quality of the field is such that it can be assumed that an opposing view will also exist in the group, even if it is unexpressed. He describes the field as shaping the interactions within it, and being shaped by the interactions within it, and therefore suggested that focusing on one in exclusion of the other may be imbalanced. He also proposed the field to

be constituted not just by the given set of interactions within it, but also by the wider societal or global context.

Of particular interest here is his related notion of 'hot spots'. A 'hot spot' is usually evidenced by an awkward silence, a felt tension, or nervous laughs or giggles. Mindell suggests that in such moments a polarized or opposite view to the dominating mindset is being felt in the field, but is struggling to be expressed. With these concepts in mind, groups can notice their own behaviour, and alert themselves to the possibility that thought and feelings are being withheld because a 'side' or polarity relating to the issue is somehow difficult to express. If attended to, groups may invite a new conversation, even on an old topic, and in doing so avoid generating and sustaining undiscussables, and their far-reaching negative consequences.

Donovan (2011), in his Action Research Study examined the conversational patterns of executive groups at precisely the time when strong feelings, awkwardness or discomfort seemed to be present in the group. The conversational patterns appeared to emerge because of collective tension present, but in all cases did not address the tension directly. Rather, the pattern seemed to be employed by the group to avoid another more threatening topic. The three patterns were the 'interrogation', the 'venting' and the 'judgement'. The 'interrogation' was characterized by a strong interest, and often very direct questioning of a member (or members) of the group in relation to specific details of some work. While the questions usually carried an underlying sense of urgency, or irritation, those feelings were not discussed directly. Consequently,

the interrogation worked to shield the group from the more jugular concerns that were driving the questions. The 'venting' pattern was characterized by one (or more) members using strong, emotionally charged language about a particular issue or topic. The effect of the 'vent' was to silence another group member or close down the topic, since most executive groups are very shy to have open conflict. Consequently the concern behind the vent remains unexplored and root causes to the issue identified were not discussed. The 'judgement' pattern was perhaps the subtlest of the three. It consisted of one or more members drawing conclusions on an important topic, stating the cause of something or describing something as 'right' or 'wrong' but not including their reasoning for those various inferences. The truthfulness of the statements was taken to be self-evident by the speaker, and others in the group did not inquire about their reasoning. Especially if used by someone who was higher in the organisations hierarchy, the result of this pattern was that the opposing view remained unexpressed in the group. Consequently, the exchanges in the group became one-sided, superficial, and various polarized views held in the group were withheld. Undiscussables resulted.

Donovan suggests that identifying and describing these conversational patterns could assist groups to avoid the avoidance that these patterns afforded. He argues that doing so will reduce undiscussables and support executive meetings to fulfill their role as important sites of learning.

Conclusion

While the concept of undiscussables is not new, our understanding about the implications of them is growing. Organisational learning has more recently been conceived to be at least as collective as it is individual, and consequently deeply informed by the dynamic of the collective. Undiscussables are both an unambiguous reflection of the power relations that shape that dynamic, and a muscular resistor to the required power relations required for collective learning. Therefore, it is clear that groups who wish to create learning in their meetings should attend to their undiscussables as a matter of priority. The practical approaches of Argyris, Mindell and Donovan are presented and contrasted as means of addressing this important problem.

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