Learning on the Run 4: Image Exchange

How to create a unifying approach for divisions with differing visions yet needing to work interdependently on collateral tasks?

The Request. A director of a state regulatory department sensed a growing divide between two divisions that reported to her and wanted a facilitator who would conduct an all-hands off-site with both divisions. The department was responsible for regulating and permitting the trucking and carrier industry to ensure public safety on state highways. One division was responsible for ensuring adequate vehicle maintenance and drivability and the other division was responsible for the drivers and company processes that would impact transportation safety. The Director wanted the divisions to create a cohesive and unified philosophy and approach to enforcement so customers felt that there was a departmental consistency in enforcement.

Larger Context. Staff from both divisions were interacting with the same "customers" from companies that they were regulating. Several VPs from different companies were beginning to complain that the two divisions were sending conflicting messages about the extent of regulatory violations and what was needed to correct them. The Managers for each division had very different interpersonal styles that created conflict between them. This conflict trickled down so the divisional safety and engineering staff were beginning to "form into camps" as well. Additionally, the divisions represented very different disciplines and philosophies for how to treat their customers: A cooperative and coaching approach or a stricter evaluative and decree approach.

Consulting Intervention. There were several initial planning and feedback meetings with the two Division Managers. They agreed to sponsor a 2-day off-site for everyone in both divisions. Also, they were able to be frank with each other about their differences and realized the impact that was having on their respective staffs. After an all-hands introductory meeting, everyone was given a chance to be interviewed by the consultant. The interview information was summarized and presented to the Managers. The retreat consisted of three components.

Part 1. Leadership Commitments. The managers presented the feedback they received from the summarized interviews and shared any adjustments they were prepared to make and be held accountable for.

Part 2 Best Practice Vision. At mixed tables, staff took turns sharing stories of a successfully resolved compliance issue. Common themes and intriguing ideas formed the basis for a recommended best practice vision.[1]

Part 3. Image Exchange.[2] Participants were asked to place themselves along a scale, from cooperative to aggressive enforcement. After some reactions to the data generated, tables were formed of those who scaled themselves similarly in how they approached enforcement. The tables were asked to respond and report on three questions:

1. How do you see yourselves when it comes to enforcement? What do you value most about your approach? What assumptions do you make about yourselves as a group?
2. What assumptions do you make about those who may have a different approach?
3. Taking an "outsider's viewpoint", what might you consider your "contribution" towards any unproductive disagreements or "camps" you or others may experience?

The groups them proceeded to define solutions and next steps for all-hands consensus building and managerial sponsorship.

Last Line. Helping groups in conflict to share their perceptions honestly while surfacing uncomfortable feelings can form the basis for problem solving and lasting cooperation.

[1] For a detailed discussion of the appreciative process, see: Bushe, G. (1998) Appreciative Inquiry with Teams. *The Organization Development Journal*, 16:3, 41-50.
[2] Image exchange is presented as detailed case studies in: Burke, W.W. (1972) Managing Conflicts Between Groups. In, *New Technologies in Organization Development*, John D. Adams, Eds. NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science and in: Blake, R.R. Shepard, H, & Mouton, J.S. (1964) *Managing Intergroup Conflict in Industry*. Gulf Publishing Co.