



## Happily ever after ...



Based on an actual intervention facilitated by Bob Dick. This case study has also been described in *To tame a unicorn ...: recipes for cultural intervention*, third edition, by Bob Dick and Tim Dalmau (Interchange, 1994).

### **It wasn't originally intended as a cultural intervention...**

“Caire” (not its actual name) was a small but growing organisation. It provided support and advocacy for particular disadvantaged groups. It was a vigorous organisation which owed much of its character to the energy and dedication of its founders. There had been recent changes in size, structure and other aspects of its operation. These had led to a number of programs to help the organisation to manage the change. I had facilitated some of them.

For example, about a year earlier I had facilitated a previous exercise. It had involved goal-setting and strategic planning. Over some months, several more-or-less successful changes had been achieved.

Now the director of Caire contacted me again. She asked if I would help the organisation to take the next step.

It was a hurried phone call. We both had other meetings to rush to. It seemed that structure and relationships might require attention. But by the time we ended the call I was still unclear about exactly what was being asked of me. Just before we said our "Byes" I asked the director if I might phone other Caire staff. She agreed readily.

Over the following week I spoke to a small handful of people, hoping to clarify what was required. Again, mention of structure and relationships came up. Again, despite my probing, I was given little detail of what Caire really wanted or needed.

### **It began with further diagnosis...**

I was nervous as I arrived at the venue for the day's program. I was still unclear about the purpose of the day. Usually I over-prepare. On this occasion I felt spectacularly under-prepared.

As we assembled I invited the participants to introduce themselves to me. In a quest for more information I asked each person to say something about her or his expectations for the day. I also requested each person, as part of the introduction, to include some information about herself that "would surprise your colleagues". I thought that the level of disclosure, and the way it was received, would help me to diagnose the quality of relationships.

I interpreted the high level of disclosure in the introductions as evidence of good relationships. A good natured reception of all disclosures further supported this interpretation. The same themes of structure and relationship emerged as before. To my growing frustration and anxiety I was no clearer about the purpose for the day. What was I going to do?

I knew from previous contact with Caire that their people were skilled and dedicated. They were committed to high performance. In the past I had experienced them as honest and well-intentioned.

*I was puzzled. Why wasn't there more clarity of purpose? Might there be unstated issues?*

There wasn't enough clarity for me to decide how to structure the day. I needed more information. I decided to use story as a tool for further diagnosis — cultural diagnosis.

The tool I chose was a version of fairy story. I wanted to know more about the present culture of Caire. Information about Caire's history might provide this, I assumed.

I gave the instructions for the activity ...

“Tell the history of Caire in the form of a fairy story. You already know the two most important things you need to know, which is how fairy stories begin ...”

The participants responded “Once upon a time”

“... and how they end.”

The participants said “happily ever after.”

*A fairy story? Isn't that somewhat frivolous in nature?*

*Yes. In a sense, that is its virtue. It encourages participants to engage with the task in a playful way. This, I assumed, made it more likely that they would give more expression to their less-conscious thoughts.*

*In much of my work I use a particular conceptual model of culture. I assume that an organisation's very sense of **identity** is a core component of its culture. That shared identity, I assume, arises from its shared history.*

*I wanted to know, and lacked, what aspects of Caire were most important to its people. A story about Caire's history, I thought, might reveal what I was missing.*

*By requiring a happy ending, fairy story also asks people to imagine a desirable future. Change can be a matter of deciding which aspects of the past can be buried, and which can be carried into the future. The burial can be done with full honour. People then are often willing to put aside the restrictions of history — and move beyond them.*

*In short, I assumed that history would reveal the key characteristics of Caire's identity. Addressing it through story would reveal it in metaphor. This would ease the way for Caire's members to say what might otherwise be difficult to express. The required happy ending would elicit whatever sense of collective purpose activated Caire.*

Initially I set 45 minutes for the activity. Small groups were formed. To ensure that people didn't work only with those of similar views, I invited them to join the people they knew least well. I asked each group to document its story on butcher paper. I reminded them that this was a fairy story. Fairy stories are told in a certain style of language, and with appropriate illustrations. They began the work.

The energy in each of the small groups followed a similar path. There was a tentative and cautious beginning. Then, slowly, participants began to give rein to their creativity. Energy, noise levels and laughter increased as they chose a theme and began to develop their story.

It became apparent that the stories would not be completed in 45 minutes. I extended the time. *I glanced nervously at my watch. The hours were slipping away.* With the enthusiastic concurrence of the participants, the activity took about two hours.

### **Then something happened which changed the shape of the day...**

With the stories nearing completion, the energy level in all groups suddenly dropped.

*I was puzzled. This was unusual. With fairy story I'm accustomed to an occasional slow start. When energy picks up, however, it almost always remains high. Most people **enjoy** fairy story.*

*I tried to tune in to my own feelings for a clue to what was happening. I could identify feelings of apprehension. That was understandable—I still didn't know what I was going to do next. There was something else, too. Was it a sense of grief?*

*I could not explain that so easily. If it was grief perhaps I was picking it up from the participants. Let's assume it is, I thought. See where that leads.*

*I wondered if grief could explain the sudden drop of energy in the small groups. It seemed to occur when Caire members were devising the "happy ending" that fairy story requires. To achieve the happy ending, did they have to put aside something that was precious to them?*

*I asked the small groups to rejoin the whole group. Let's see what happens, I thought.*

### **The stories were shared...**

I reminded participants of the anticipation and curiosity that, in their childhood, they brought to listening to stories. I encouraged them to listen and enjoy, not to intellectualise.

I don't recall in detail how I did this. It may have been something like the following.

*"As you listen to each story, you will notice the **setting** — where and when it takes place. There are the **characters**, often including heroes and villains. And then there is the **plot**, the sequence of events.*

*"You will notice these. I encourage you not to think too much about them. Just be aware of them as you listen and enjoy each story."*

Each of the groups told its story to the other groups. Without exception, each story told of a change in structure just before the "... happily ever after".

*I could think of no explanation of this that was more plausible than the one I already held.*

### **But further steps were still unclear...**

Very tentatively, I explained my hunch to the participants. I sought their response. Yes, they acknowledged, they were sad. Certain structures, and certain styles of decision-making had characterised Caire in the past. There was a suspicion, barely voiced, that these valued features might have to be abandoned.

With this tentative confirmation, we continued the activity ...

*I was reluctant to embark on a **rational** analysis of either structure or decision-making. These were intelligent and well-educated people, well used to intellectual analysis. With intellectual processes we might lose what we had already tentatively unearthed. Sociometry, I thought, might serve the purpose better.*

I proposed that we explore Caire's structure physically, within the room. I gave my instructions carefully ...

"Begin to move around the room. When you find yourself near to someone you depend on to do your work, stay close. When you find yourself near someone for whom this is less true, move away.

"When you've captured the *essential* work relationships as well as you can, stay where you are."

People began to move. And as one person moved, it stimulated movements by others. Gradually the movement slowed. Then it stopped. I encouraged participants to question each other's position. In discussion, the Caire members continued to adjust the overall tableau. Finally they declared that it fitted as well as possible.

## **A diagnosis of Caire began to appear...**

In the past Caire had been characterised by consensual decision-making. All people were involved in all decisions. Now, Caire was growing in numbers and in responsibilities. Decision making had become inefficient and cumbersome.

*This, too, was consistent with the explanation I was already considering.*

Our exploration continued. Consensus was an important Caire value. So was equity. Involving everyone in consensual decision making was an important expression of these values. But performance and effectiveness were core values too. These were being undermined.

The discussion turned to recent difficulties with relationships. Increasingly, formerly good relationships were being tested by tensions between a desire for consensus and the demands of the organisation and its tasks.

## **Preparing for change...**

*Time was running out. I was tempted to switch to more rational methods. I feared, however, that the lessons which had emerged indirectly might then be overlooked. I decided to continue with sociometry to explore alternative structures.*

I invited participants to **experiment** with different structures.

*“Experiment. Let’s experiment with different options. Let’s explore multiple possibilities.”*

Several volunteers took it in turns to form tableaux demonstrating possible structures. The intention was for participants to check for themselves how each of the structures “felt”.

*I repeated the instructions to “experiment” several times. I was keen to encourage a sense of play and creativity rather than of deliberate analysis.*

The people engaged in the task with enthusiasm. There was high energy. They discussed the experimental structures eagerly.

*I was beginning to feel more confident that we would achieve something worthwhile. It seemed to me that people may have begun to put the old structure and style behind themselves. If so, they were ready to move into the future. I wished to confirm this before proceeding.*

At the conclusion of each “experiment in structure”, people first moved to their previous physical position that represented Caire as it was. Then, slowly, they walked to the new position. As they did so they noticed the changes in relationships that each new structure implied. They reflected on the thoughts and feelings elicited by the change.

*The sociometry is a metaphor for the system, I reasoned. Similarly, the movement is a metaphor for changes in that system. Each time participants moved from the old to the proposed, they were in a sense walking away from the old.*

The end of the day drew near. I sensed that there was general agreement on the main issues. Further, there were fairly clear indications of the structures that might be generally acceptable. I reflected that it was fortunate all of Caire, and its management Board, were present.

Finally, all of the proposed experiments had been attempted. Caire’s director, a well-loved and respected person, offered to organise a tableau. She combined the best of the previous experiments. As she did so, participants discussed her proposal with obvious approval.

### **Preparing for follow-up...**

We concluded the day with two more-rational activities. First, we recorded on butcher paper the agreements that had been reached. Second, people volunteered to follow up, to ensure that the new

structure came into being. Although we were a little rushed we completed the tasks.

While we were doing this, one of the more sceptical participants made a comment that initially surprised me. "If only we had been able to make as much progress this morning as we did this afternoon!" he said.

*My perception is very different. I believe that it was during the morning that people readied themselves for the changes that we later agreed. It was fairy story that allowed a deeper exploration of Caire's culture. We used a form of fairy story that deliberately included a historical dimension. I believe that the recollection of Caire's history reminded participants of Caire's essential identity.*

*Sociometry then linked the present to the future by exploring existing and possible new structures.*

*Sociometry and story each work on multiple levels. They engage more of the person than just the intellect. They add extra dimensions to understanding, beyond what is usually available in discussion. Without those metaphorical explorations, I doubt that the achieved changes could have been so effectively addressed.*

I prepared this account of the Caire case study as a "taster" for the 2016 Story Conference, Parkville, 23-25 November.

There are half-day workshops on the morning of 23 November. I'll facilitate one of them on the use of story for diagnosis. See <http://www.thestoryconference.com.au/pre-conference-workshops/>

The conference then begins at lunch time on 23 November, continuing on 24 and 25 November. You can explore the entire exciting program at <http://www.thestoryconference.com.au/program>