

Understanding Systems - “We take things so personally”

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My experience of working in organisations, large and small, is that, as Barry Oshry repeatedly says, “Stuff happens!” The stuff that happens often drives me to take it personally and to react by explaining things with a story based upon my assumptions of why the person or team did it. My reactivity though is predictable.

There are situational patterns of social interaction common to family, community or business groupings. You can take one individual out of the network, substitute with another, and the same patterns will keep recurring. By understanding that a lot of what happens to us is not personal, we can start to respond in a way that is best for the situation and creates partnership with others, rather than fuelling the flames of organisational politics.

For over 30 years, Barry Oshry has been on a single-minded quest to unlock the mysteries of power and powerlessness in social systems. He began his work in the 1960s when he began experimenting with large-scale organisational simulations for business students. By 1970, Barry had developed this thinking into The Power Lab. From his Power Lab experience he developed the concepts of Top, Middle, Bottom and Customer, which lie at the heart of the Organisational Workshop simulation. These programmes have been providing ‘system sight’ to thousands of participants throughout the world.

“Working in partnership” is a mantra intoned by many, whether politicians, community leaders, business executives or social activists. Our difficulties in achieving this type of relationship on a consistent basis are in evidence all around us. We are constantly drawn into reactivity (what Barry calls our Door ‘A’ response). These systems concepts can help us to become more aware and choiceful (the Door ‘B’ response) and choose what is necessary, in order to make things work rather than make us feel better.

The Organisational Workshop is an experiential way of understanding these truths and, if acted upon, could allow us to create more fruitful and productive ways of working.