

Creating Space for ... Common Sense

Reflections on a Strategic Review

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‘So what did God say to you about where we should be going?’ asked Mark the Chief Executive of a Christian NGO who had contracted me to undertake a strategic review. At the outset I had told him I would be trying to integrate my faith in the strategic review of their international work. The problem was that I felt I had heard nothing other than what was obvious by using my professional common sense. But after many hours of trying to prayerfully listen to God, I felt that this common sense was actually God’s word in the situation. God works through human wisdom too.

Child Help (name disguised) is a UK NGO that provides services for disadvantaged youth in the UK. Over the years their trustees picked up a small number of random children’s charities in Eastern Europe and East Africa which they supported with on-going grants. I worked together with Doreen (a Ugandan colleague who did the field work), to assess what Child Help was currently doing internationally and how that could better fit with its identity and strategy in the UK. The international portfolio of fairly poor practice education projects (private schools) represented only about 2% of its total work, but was taking up almost 20% management time. Each year they were investing almost £200,000 from their reserves to keep the international programmes afloat. But Child Help trustees in particular were very attached to this international work. They had built up strong emotional ties over the years.

We explicitly tried to integrate faith in this work. I did spend a long time listening and praying to discern God’s way forward. But we received no miraculous sign or even a clear word. We felt that we should listen to our professional judgement. Because we felt the situation was so clear, the report was one of the easiest I have had to write. The recommendations were obvious and supported by considerable and consistent evidence.

I felt we submitted a strong report that comprehensively answered the terms of reference. I thought we were near the end of our intervention. But when I sent in my report, I soon realised we were only at the beginning. I had under-estimated how emotional any change process is. Although the Chief Executive and leadership team were very pleased with the work, one of the influential trustees who had been on the board for 25 years, was not. He felt we had not answered his questions or given him the answers he hoped for. I phoned him to find out what he felt was missing. I listened and listened and tried to understand. He was quite angry and upset. The change he wanted was ‘more of the same’.

When I put the phone down, I went back to my own consultancy standards to re-assess our work in the light of his comments. On reflection I felt we had pretty much lived up to our standards, except that we had not fully appreciated the emotional dimension of change, particularly amongst the ‘old guard’ trustees. The real work of an OD

intervention often starts after the report stage.

To gain the essential buy-in from the trustees, we had a series of meetings between myself, the Senior Leadership Team and a small group of trustees (including the disgruntled one). As Doreen wisely directed: 'The Board need to start walking the road of trying to reconcile the contradictions between what they believe they are doing and what is the reality on the ground'. It was a long process of going two steps forward and one backward. It involved a lot of quick prayers in the midst of heated discussions. Eventually it was put to the full board. After all the circular conversations, this proved smoother than I had imagined. They completely accepted the recommendations we had made.

This experience showed me again the importance of taking a thoroughly professional approach to OD even when integrating the spiritual. Some of the professional elements which had proved essential were:

Developing trust with the leadership before deciding to work together. Did we believe in where they wanted to take Child Help? Did we like each other?

A clear contracting process with the objectives clearly spelt out (something which we had to revisit with the 'old guard' trustees).

Based on evidence from the field. Having strong field work undertaken by Doreen proved vital in convincing trustees of the need for change.

Using a mixture of data gathering methods which validated each other made for a much stronger case.

Putting a lot of effort into writing and rewriting the presentations both in the report and in meetings helped communicate clearly what we were saying.

Thinking through the political dynamics on the board and developing appropriate tactics helped ensure they reached a point of making a decision.

This work with Child Help reminded me that not all organisational ills are spiritual. In seeking to integrate the spiritual, I also need to avoid over-spiritualising. Solid management logic still has a central place in decision-making. The main barrier to change in this case proved to be emotional. We needed to address it on this level and realise that logic alone would not convince them of the need for change. Yet who knows the role of prayer in helping trustees and staff overcome the emotional pain that change involved...

Taking a spiritual approach to change does not circumvent, but actually reinforces, the need to be thoroughly professional in OD. In this particular experience, Creating Space for Grace was mostly about creating space for common sense.