

Enhancing Working Across Differences with the Problematic Moment Approach

Can you recall an instance when something happened in a group with which you were working and you didn't know what to say, or you knew what you ought to say, but didn't? Perhaps some of the following also occurred: everyone was silent for a while; someone changed the subject; you felt anxious, angry, or sad; you sensed tension in the group; you wished you had done something differently; or, in retrospect, you were upset for unclarified reasons.¹

Moments of silence frequently occur in group conversations and interactions. These silences can have many possible meanings depending on the context. A silence might indicate that the group is enjoying a moment of reflection, or that it is waiting for the appropriate person to respond to a question, or that it has said all that can be said about a theme and is ready to take up another topic. We focus on a particular kind of moment of silence that we believe warrants special attention because it marks the presence of a theme, or collective memory, that the group wishes to push aside. This repressed theme blocks the reflection the group needs to undertake in order to deepen their experience with each other and enhance their ability to work with their differences.

For example, imagine a group of consultants analyzing an organizational intervention on issues of diversity. One person asks if any gay people are "out" in the organization. Another member of the group then asks if straight people were also "out." A moment of silence follows as members encounter the heterosexist assumptions underlying the group's dis-

course. The moment presents an opportunity for members to confront the societal discrimination they are enacting. The silence may also mark a moment when members recover memories² of spe-

cific examples of discrimination they have experienced in the past. As a result, the group may be reticent to address the feelings prompted by the silence and it may result in them becoming overly cautious about saying anything of significance to each other as the conversation continues. We call these kinds of incidents

problematic moments. Problematic moments are unlike other moments because they mark a brief point in time when the conditions of possibility for the group to have new, more productive, and deeper conversations can be realized.

Conversational patterns in organizations are maintained by power dynamics that are often covert, but which shape our identities and interactions at work. For example, patterns of conversation that assume traditional nuclear family arrangements leave little space for those with other family arrangements to participate fully in discussions about family benefits and policies.³ Because these power dynamics are located in hidden discourses⁴ that shape how people think and talk, a common assumption is that they cannot be

analyzed. However, we believe problematic moments occur when the existing conversational pattern in a group breaks down. Such moments present the group with the opportunity to reflect on their

specific ways of thinking and talking and to consider alternatives to change them.

The Problematic Moment Approach (PMA) is a method that seeks to change established patterns of conversations in groups so that members can identify and address the unacknowledged differences that constrain the attain-

ment of their organizational goals. Attending to these breakdowns in a group's talk and conversation can help individuals understand the larger societal discourses they themselves enact, thereby uncovering how their own ways of thinking and talking constrain their aspirations and goals as managers, workers, CEOs, and board members.

Recognizing the Problematic Moment

Problematic moments are experienced as moments of "silence"—nobody talks—or "din"⁵—everyone talks at once—in a group. They are moments when things appear to be going wrong or in an unexpected direction. It seems like the group has reached a kind of impasse and does not know, just for a few seconds,

Signs of a Problematic Moment

It is usually marked by a moment of silence or din.

When asked, most members of the group can identify when a problematic moment has occurred.

It is a point when the group momentarily does not know how to go on.

The moment indicates a theme or repressed memory that members are collectively avoiding.

how to go on. Usually these moments have an emotional impact which nearly all members of the group experience. Group members may also experience a “stretching” of time, where time appears to stand still—like what happens to us in moments of embarrassment or danger. In clock time, the moment of silence may be extremely brief.

When a problematic moment occurs, people are called upon to be creative, to take up the topics or issues being avoided, and to prepare the way for new conversational patterns and connections in the group where power differences can be addressed in a productive way. When people review these moments, they can understand more clearly what topics of conversation are being avoided. However, in many cases the occasion to engage in a new conversation is not taken up by the group. Thus, the need for the *Problematic Moment Approach* (PMA), which provides the opportunity to reflect on the issues being avoided so they are more likely to be addressed in the future.

Our research indicates that the Problematic Moment Approach is particularly powerful when a group is committed to enhancing working across its differences. The approach can help the group move to a different level of understanding and acting on those differences, be they social, functional, or cultural.⁶

Conversational patterns

We regard problematic moments as “opportunity points” for changing the conversational and interactive patterns in a group or group’s discourse. However, more often than not it is difficult to have the courage to take the kind of leadership needed to shift the conversation. The feelings that arise in a problematic moment are avoided and the conversation continues as though nothing happened. Consequently, the group misses the opportunity to reflect on and change its way of talking by bringing in what remains unsaid. In our previous example, the problematic moment revealed that not paying

attention to how heterosexual people express their sexual orientation in everyday organizational interactions is a very subtle expression of heterosexist dominance. It is as though the group has a collective agreement not to question the power dynamics that enable certain kinds of people, such as white heterosexuals, to enact the micro-inequities that privilege certain groups and diminish others.

The Problematic Moment Approach

In order to realize the potential of what occurs in a problematic moment, we have designed a methodology—the Problematic Moment Approach—for documenting, identifying, and analyzing them.

Step 1: Contracting. The consultant contracts with a group to help them assess some of the covert power dynamics across differences that may be inhibiting the group’s performance. The consultant identifies organizational problems that may be solved by applying the PMA and helps set goals for desired changes. Change goals cited by organizations we’ve worked with include: becoming a more effective multicultural board, reducing discrimination in the interview process for new hires, and planning more engaging and participative conference discussions. The client and the consultant agree on a particular context to videotape the group at work. This should be a work situation that generates the typical group and organizational conversations that need examination and improvement.

Step 2: Documenting Problematic Moments. Next the consultant explains to the group that work interactions will be videotaped to capture important moments in the group’s work life and, with their permission, the group is videotaped in a working session. The consultant notes the times when, in her opinion, problematic moments have occurred. During a break, the consultant asks members of the group to identify if and when they experienced a special moment in the session. In a large group, a team is often assigned responsibility for tracking the moments. To cor-

roborate the data, phone interviews are sometimes conducted afterwards to ask people to identify significant moments in the working session. From these interviews, it is usually easy for the consultant to pinpoint the problematic moments.

Step 3: Preparing the Data. After problematic moments have been captured on video, the consultant reviews the taped session to locate where in the video problematic moments occurred and selects key moments to show back to the group. A short videotape is then produced of these problematic moments. Sufficient material must be included before and after each moment to help the viewers remember the context; however, it is best to keep each segment short (we recommend no more than two minutes). Transcripts are made of these, and the consultant designs a process to guide the group in discussing and reflecting on the meaning of the problematic moments. For example, what do these particular moments reveal about the hidden assumptions and dominant and repressed discourses that show up in the group’s conversations?

Step 4: Reviewing the Problematic Moments & Action Planning. The last step in the Problematic Moment Approach is to convene the original group or a subset of that group in a retreat setting to reflect on and learn from discussing the problematic moments documented in the video. Working moment by moment, the group looks at the videotape, reads the transcript, and remembers what was happening. Sample questions to facilitate this discussion are: What do you see happening here? Why was that moment problematic for you? What topic or issue is being avoided or repressed? What are the consequences of this avoidance for the group’s work and its espoused values? What norms and assumptions make it difficult for the group to talk about this?

It is vital to end the retreat session by identifying concrete steps the group will take to make changes that reflect learnings derived from their analysis of the

problematic moments. Some changes may be subtle, but nonetheless significant. For example, if in the future a topic that used to be silenced or avoided, such as acknowledging the needs of gays and lesbians in the organization, is now taken up in work discussions, the problematic moment approach has helped this multicultural organization move forward in their goal to “walk their talk” of inclusion.

The PMA in Action

BEC, a small organization whose mission is to advocate for a variety of social issues that trouble a very diverse community with a high population of immigrants in a major US city, provides an illustration of the Problematic Moment Approach in action. A multicultural board representative of the key constituency groups in the community oversees the affairs of BEC with a skeleton staff of an executive director, part-time staff, and community volunteers.

The consultants were called in to assist the BEC board in becoming more sensitive and effective at managing the cultural, language, and class differences among its members. The monthly board meetings were conducted in English and simultaneously translated into three other languages—Portuguese, Spanish, and Khmer. The group was having trouble working as an effective board, yet recognized the importance of learning from and finding better ways of working with their very rich socio-cultural differences. After securing agreement for the PMA process, a regular two-hour board meeting was videotaped. In writing and in conversation, the consultants then asked board members to identify “significant” moments they had experienced in the meeting. There was general agreement that four significant moments had occurred. The consultants reviewed the tape and confirmed that these were problematic moments—moments that could help the group understand issues raised that seemed too difficult for the group to

handle. An edited video that captured these four problematic moments was produced and was shown to the board in a one-day retreat. Analysis and discussion of each moment helped the board assess strengths and challenges regarding how they addressed these issues.

A problematic moment occurred when the executive director reported on key activities of the past month. One of those activities had been to provide assistance and orientation to immigrants in the community about a new law that changed immigration and residency requirements. A brief discussion followed the report, which clarified the need and scope of the services offered. Various board members voiced their concern as to whether this activity was aligned with the mission of the organization and whether it exhausted the scarce resources of the organization.

A Cambodian board member raised his hand and asked to speak. Through an interpreter, he told the story of his hardship and agony in coming to the USA after being persecuted in the killing fields of Cambodia. In a very moving description, the board member said how important the immigration laws that are about to be changed had been in saving him and his family, how important the support he received from BEC had been for his survival in the US, and how important it was for BEC to continue to offer that assistance and support to other immigrants in the community at this time. A few seconds of silence followed his speaking—a problematic moment. Board members later reported that during this time they got in touch with the mission of the organization and their own commitment to help empower and support social change in the community. Afterwards, they felt more eager to advocate for the immigration assistance program despite the considerable drain it would mean for BEC’s resources. In that moment, despite their many differences, the board was able to find common ground for action and for reaffirming the organization’s commitment to diversity and social justice.

BEC made the following changes to the way it runs board meetings as a result of the analysis of the above problematic moment, plus the three others that occurred during the meeting:

Board structure. New responsibilities and roles were re-distributed to give more participation to all board members.

Board working norms. A multilingual glossary of terms frequently used by the board was produced. Interpreters now sit behind, not next to, people receiving interpretation so that the non-English speaking members, rather than their interpreters, interact directly with the English speaking board members.

Board skills and procedures. The board worked on improving their skills to run meetings. The board now meets more frequently and covers fewer agenda items at each meeting. This change makes it easier for non-English speaking members to prepare for and follow the board discussion.

Mentoring. Experienced board members began mentoring new board members on key issues affecting the community. In these conversations the mission and strategic challenges faced by the organization are the central topics of discussion.

The analysis and discussion helped board members to understand the relationship of these themes to the differences and diversity they wanted to manage more effectively. These changes to established patterns of conversations among BEC’s board enabled them to attend more successfully to the challenges of having a multicultural and multilingual group and equalized power between the English and non-English speaking members.

Challenging and Changing the Conversation

A problematic moment is a momentary challenge to an established conversational pattern that may or may not lead to new conversations and interactions in a working group. When a silence or a din occurs in a group, the typical response of

the facilitator or leader is to treat those moments as disruptive to the dynamic of the group and to intervene to keep the group “on task.” In this way the facilitator/leader unconsciously acts in the service of established power dynamics and, therefore, prevents the emergence of new conversations and ways of thinking about a situation or organizational problem. In contrast, the PMA allows a group to review subtle challenges to its own discourse as they occur in work interactions. The group can then evaluate whether those patterns are shaping their own organizational identities and relationships in productive or hindering ways.

The PMA helps people make their own meanings of what is happening in the group. It is democratic, in that it tries to involve all members of the group in the meaning-making process of everyday organizational life. It also has the potential to get to deeper levels of meaning; for example, to explore things that some or all members of the group are repressing or do not want to talk about. Finally, PMA allows for differences to be addressed in the context of specific work situations.

It is also our experience that participants intuitively understand the purpose and process of the PMA. You do not have to give a detailed explanation of the approach to have a group understand what they will gain from engaging in the process. The data for analysis in the video clips of problematic moments is usually not a matter of dispute in the sense of “who said what to whom when.” The reflective use of videotape encourages people to re-evaluate their opinions as they may explain their own actions differently when they see themselves without feeling defensive. The data is manageable; for example the group works with just a few

minutes of videotape. And, perhaps most importantly, the distancing effect of watching yourself on a monitor has the effect of focusing analysis at the level of the group rather than on individual behavior.

There are also challenges in using this approach. For example, the group has to be willing to face the fact that they may not be talking in ways that support their espoused values and goals. They may fear that group cohesion will be disrupted and group members may not be willing to be videotaped.

Significance for working across differences in organizations

We have described an approach that can be used to change established patterns of group conversations so that members can more successfully attend to the unacknowledged differences that constrain the attainment of their organizational goals. When people review problematic moments, they can understand more clearly what topics of conversation are being avoided and collectively examine the potential challenge to the discourse of values, beliefs, and assumptions being constructed by the group. Inquiring into the creative possibilities of participating in evolving events as they happen prepares the way for new conversational patterns and connections in a group to support working more successfully with the differences that both constrain and give the organization its life and energy.⁷

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Notes

¹ From a survey developed by Stephanie Jo Kent for a quantitative research study on the affective experience of individuals experiencing problematic moments (2003).

² We are aware of the controversial nature of this term and its use by therapists to help victims recover buried or “repressed memories” of childhood trauma. In this paper we draw on Michael Billig’s notion of the “dialogic unconscious,” where he reformulates Freud’s concept of repression using theories of language. See Billig, M. 1999. *Freudian Repression: Conversation Creating the Unconscious*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

³ Scully, M. and W.E.D. Creed. 1999. Restructured families: Issues of equality and need. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 562: 51-54.

⁴ We rely on Norman Fairclough’s use of the word “discourse.” He brought together language analysis and social theory by combining the social-theoretical approach of discourse with the text-and-interaction approach of linguistically oriented discourse analysis. See Fairclough, N. 1992. *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

⁵ Harlow, E., Hearn, J. and Parking, W. 1996. Gendered noise: Organizations and the silence and din of domination. In C. Itzin and J. Newman (Eds.), *Gender, culture and organizational change*, 91-107. London: Routledge.

⁶ Merrill-Sands, D., Holvino, E., and Cumming, J. 2002. *CGO Working Paper, No. 11, Working with Diversity: A Focus on Global Organizations*. Boston: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.

⁷ For E.E. Olson and G.H. Eoyang a key change task is to surface significant differences and then integrate them into new solutions. See Olson, E. and Eoyang, G. 2001. *Facilitating Organization Change: Lessons from Complexity Science*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.

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