Coaching
CONSTELLATIONS

CASE STUDY
LEAVING AND JOINING
by Richard Boston

Context

I facilitated this intervention on Day 2 of a fairly intense three-day leadership development programme attended by fourteen middle managers who all work for the same private sector organisation. Some knew each other already; others had first met on Day 1. The programme is always run by two facilitators – one from within the organisation, the other a member of my consultancy. Very occasionally, illness or emergent issues in the organisation mean we have to change one of the facilitators part way through. On this occasion, we replaced the internal facilitator (Karen) with a new member of my consultancy team, 'Mark'. Mark and I have known each other for years and were both trained in systemic coaching with Constellations. We were pleased to have been handed a perfect opportunity to work with 'leaving and joining'.

Why I chose to use a systemic intervention

1. The client system is highly project-based. Leaving and joining are likely to receive little explicit attention due to their frequency and the fast pace of the organisation.

2. It is not uncommon for at least one participant to be a relatively new joiner and/or considering leaving the organisation.

3. We had some live 'leaving and joining' happening in the group. Attending to this well would contribute positively to the health of the group while blending experience, theory, practice and reflection to embed learning and thus benefit the wider system.

4. The expectation on the programme is that facilitators practice what they preach. Doing 'leaving and joining' well would thus contribute positively to the wider 'system' of the programme in its organisational context.

How I Offered

I began by attending to Karen's leaving more fully than I might have done otherwise. At the end of Day 1, I initiated an exchange between her and the group that included both sides acknowledging the other and expressing what (if anything) they needed from each other. Later that evening I met with Mark and told him I wanted to run an explicit 'joining' intervention at the start of Day 2. After three iterations, we had co-created an intervention that included the 'leaving and joining' exercise we'd experienced on the Coaching Constellations course.

Who

Richard is a psychologist, author and speaker who specialises in leadership. His work varies but generally involves coaching and profiling individuals, groups and senior teams. He trained in the 'Fundamentals of Systemic Coaching and Constellations' in Bristol, UK in 2013.

What

Richard describes the application of the principles and practices as they relate to 'joining and leaving' systems in the middle of a three-day leadership development programme involving 14 participants.

When

This work described in this case study was done following a training in the Fundamentals of Systemic Coaching & Constellations, in the summer of 2013.

Note

The confidentiality of the private individuals, teams and businesses involved in each case study has been protected by the author.

The Intervention

At the start of Day 2, I welcomed everyone and said "This is Mark". He said a simple "Hi". Then I said "We talked about leaving and joining yesterday, so before Mark joins us fully we'll look at a hypothetical team and the impact of leaving and joining. This is not this group." We were keen to avoid representing Karen or having the group represent themselves as we wanted to keep the field clean.

I then ran the 'leaving and joining' exercise, with Mark a passive observer outside the circle. I chose two people to represent leavers (a male and a female) so as to disassociate the leaving from Karen's departure. Once the group had repositioned themselves, still using the principle of equidistance, I announced that one of these leavers had left voluntarily to pursue another opportunity and the other had been fired. I then used sentences to express potential unspoken feelings in the system (e.g. "You weren't good enough", "We saw you failing and we did nothing about it" and "You've abandoned us."). Some participants responded "But you wouldn't say that." I agreed and repeated that they're unspoken thoughts. Then I introduced a healthier set of sentences, such as "I'll take what I learned here and carry it with me" and "You gave us what you could but it wasn't enough." I quickly ran out of ideas so I asked the participants to come up with sentences. These flowed easily, which I found really interesting.

I then introduced a new joiner – a male participant who'd arrived late, just as we were in the exercise. I'd intended to use the female leaver, so the new joiner wouldn't be associated with Mark, but this meant I could keep the two leavers in role and allow the group to maintain their existing attachments to them. I asked the new joiner to read the following 'unhealthy' joining statements from the screen – based on the principles of Time and Place, and prevalent attitudes in organisational systems:

• I'm John and…
• I bring great expertise and know lots of skills you need
• I'm the leader and am in charge here now
• I need to prove my worth by changing the way things are done around here

I then asked 'John' to move into the circle and the group to move to wherever best represented their reaction. Then I asked for their observations, which they shared along with their experiences of other joinings.

'John' then stepped back out and joined in a healthier way, using the following sentences, based on respect for Time, Place and Exchange:

• I'm John and…
• I acknowledge what you've achieved and the challenges you've faced in the past
• You were all here before me and the work you have done has created a space for me to join. Thank you.
• I'd like to contribute and I'd like to work with you to find out how best to do so

Having reacted to the second joining, the group noticed that they were now largely gathered around 'John' with their backs to the two leavers.

I thanked the group, they returned to their seats and, turning the focus back into this group and the new co-facilitator, I put up a PowerPoint slide bearing the following question, which I prefaced with "Given what we've learned this morning…"

What do Mark and the rest of us need to do to ensure he joins the group in a way that enables him to...?

- Become part of the group
- Add the value we need him to add

The responses to this question were really interesting. Mark spoke first, saying all he really needed at that point was to say something – for his voice to be heard. Then participants shared a number of things, some of which might have remained unspoken (and disruptive) otherwise, including some people's frustration that changing facilitators would have a negative impact on learning and group bonding, and that they'd lose out on feedback they'd otherwise have received from Karen. It also showed that some people didn't think Karen leaving was such a big deal, where it would have been easy to assume everyone initially saw the change of facilitators as a negative.

Critically, at least one person acknowledged that their resistance ("I need evidence of Mark's competence to take over from Karen") was more about them than this actual situation – an eye-opener for them. Mark then shared information about himself, including his credentials, then asked how this had landed with the group – seeking their thoughts and feelings.

Finally, I asked that each person write on post-it notes whatever they felt Mark needed to know to enable him to add the value they needed him to add. They stuck these on the wall and Mark and I both reviewed them.

Benefits

The session clearly resonated with the participants. They made repeated subsequent references to leaving and joining. They not only welcomed Mark as a newcomer, they knew they'd learned something they wouldn't have learned had he been there all along. We also made it explicit that we'd consciously paused the work we were doing to attend to 'leaving and joining', rather than repeat the pattern around this already present in their organisational system.

Observations and integration

The extra attention to leaving and joining will stay with me for a long, long time. I'm thinking about how I personally on-board external facilitators (who, as seasoned pros and long-term acquaintances of mine, get less attention from me than the client's own properly on-boarded internal facilitators). I'm also wondering how we tackle the fact that some people drift out of the pool of internal facilitators somewhat silently – those that leave due to changing roles or increased workload, rather than those who leave to have kids or join other organisations.

Where my practice is concerned, pre-crafting some sentences, spontaneously generating others and letting participants do so too increased my confidence with the approach. Writing this case study reminds me that I remember too few of the sentences we used, so I need to find a way to record and reflect on these in future.

I intend to use four routes to develop my systemic practice: more table-top and group work, including in the same slot on this particular leadership programme; reading more about systems; the post-graduate course in systemic team coaching I started this year; the Coaching Constellations Practitioner constellations journey.