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Confidentiality

The stories in this book, whilst based on our consulting practice, are fictitious and the identifying details have been anonymised to preserve confidentiality and anonymity of characters they have been based on. The case stories are a composite of individuals and organisations presenting similar dynamics. Any resemblance to individuals or organisations is purely coincidental.

Acknowledgements

Writing a book is so often described as a solitary affair; however, this book has been far from that. It has come about as the result of many previous relationships. Usually, people co-author books after years of friendship, but the two of us took the opposite course—we became good friends after writing the book together.

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About the authors

Ajit Menon is a business psychologist and consultant with many years of experience consulting to organisations of all sizes and complexities. He started his career in India, and then subsequently moved to the UK, where he worked as an organisation development consultant in the financial services. Over his career he has consulted to a range of organisations from banks, media, insurance, private equity to criminal justice and government. Ajit is the co-founder of Blacklight Advisory Ltd, a specialist organisational consultancy to a diverse range of clients. He specialises in organisational culture and works with leaders to create an environment to support businesses to thrive and adapt to their changing contexts. This interest came from his early research into culture in diasporic communities in Kenya. Ajit has been visiting faculty on organisation development and consultancy at the London School of Economics and the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust. His passion is working with leaders to solve complex organisational problems related to culture and behavioural change.

Trevor Hough is a clinical psychologist, executive coach, and organisation development consultant. Trevor grew up as a nomad living all over the world and through this developed a keen interest in diverse cultural experiences. After his clinical training as a psychologist, Trevor

worked as a psychotherapist in Cape Town for a few years before the nomadic voice within him spoke up. Trevor has been consulting to a diverse range of organisations globally for the last 15 years. These have included organisations from financial services, alternative energy and recycling companies as well as big retail concerns. Trevor has a strong interest in working with impact investment portfolio companies and has worked extensively with such organisations in Africa, India and Asia. Trevor works with Ajit as a principal consultant at Blacklight Advisory Ltd. Outside of his consulting work, Trevor's great passion is being out in nature. He has trained as a field and trails guide in the African bush and is in his element when out tracking animals on foot.

Foreword

Vega Zagier Roberts

This book invites you on a journey. Or rather, on eight journeys, from Mumbai to Paris and from fashion to finance. From the opening lines of each chapter, you accompany the authors from the landing of their flight or their trip on the Eurostar to meet their clients.

Often these journeys seem to have a clear roadmap at the outset. The client ‘knows’ what the problem is, and what is needed. So, they fly in these very experienced consultants, often thousands of miles, to bring their expertise and tools to provide this. When the consultants start following their hunch that something else might be going on and start exploring in more depth, there is often strong push-back from the client to stick to the initial brief and supply the intervention the client has already decided they need.

At the same time, in many of the stories, these particular consultants have been brought in because they and their way of working are already known to the organisation. Which suggests that at some level the client knows there is more going on than meets the eye—that which has been called ‘the unthought known’. The client both wants and does not want to look at what ‘lies beneath’. They want the consultants to agree to their own ‘diagnosis’ of what is needed, and they also want the consultants to make it feel safe enough to look deeper.

The terrain is complex, the invitations ambivalent. What Ronald Heifetz and his colleagues at Harvard have said about leadership is also true for consultants: that their key task is to enable people to face the hard choices confronting them—to challenge without getting pulled into providing ‘easy answers’—but also to help them by making it more bearable to face what they have been avoiding. And as they put it, this will generate ‘chaos, confusion and conflict’, when what people think they need is certainty and quick solutions.

Many situations can be worked with by paying attention to what is visible and measurable, and can be addressed using known methods. These are often referred to as ‘tame problems’. But ‘wicked problems’ cannot be clearly formulated: they involve multiple interdependent factors, many of which may well not be visible at the outset. This means working with data that is less immediately available, and may be overlooked when one feels driven to solve the problem before fully understanding it. And this demands something of leaders and consultants beyond expertise and familiar solutions.

First, it requires tolerating uncertainty. The pressure on leaders—and also on consultants—to ‘know’ is huge. When consultants are able to withstand this pressure, they also model something for their clients about the value of ‘not knowing’ until the situation has been explored in more depth. The poet Keats spoke of ‘negative capability’, the capability to bear ‘being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, with any irritable [premature] reaching after fact and reason’. From this place, something new—something previously unknown—can emerge.

Second, it requires being in touch with ‘what lies beneath’. The authors use the familiar metaphor of the iceberg, of which only about a tenth is visible above the water. But, as they point out, what lies below is not just a static mass of ice but a whole ecosystem. There are reefs and currents. Exploring under the surface carries risk, not least the risk of being caught up in the swirls and eddies. Often we defend ourselves by keeping our distance from the currents—the organisational dynamics—so as not to get swept away. When we can allow ourselves to be *in* the currents, to feel the undertow, we begin to get a first-hand sense of what is really going on.

Both uncertainty and getting caught in the currents make us vulnerable. And vulnerability often brings feelings of shame. Brené Brown,

American professor and author, speaks about ‘the power of vulnerability’ in what became one of the most watched TED talks of all time, with over 50 million views. This led to numerous invitations to speak to organisations, often with a request, please, not to talk about vulnerability or shame but rather about innovation and creativity. But, as she points out, it is precisely at those times when we dare to be vulnerable and to listen to our experiences of shame that we can become most creative.

The authors describe just such moments, when they find themselves buffeted by feelings of anger or confusion or an urge to blame. As experienced process consultants, they know that difficult feelings are often vital clues to what is going on, but that does not always make the feelings easy to bear. They are frank in acknowledging their feelings of embarrassment and shame when they get derailed and lose their way for a while. They also show how they use both consulting to themselves (in the section ‘Consultant’s reflections’ in each chapter) and peer supervision to regain perspective.

A unique element of this book is the reporting of the actual peer-to-peer conversations between the authors, where the consultant not directly involved in the case helps the other delve deeper into the dynamics they have got caught up in. The authors call these conversations ‘peer supervision’. Supervision is usually a very private space where outsiders cannot see in, but in this book the reader gets an insider perspective on the process of losing and re-finding one’s way.

Rather than supervision, which comes from the Latin *super* (above) and *videre* (see), I prefer the term ‘extravision’, which captures the key element: having someone outside the immediate situation to help one think. This can, of course, be a manager or coach, but it can be a peer or even someone who is junior to oneself. We each have our own way of making sense of situations. We also each have our blind spots, particularly when we are caught up by the undertow, or when our defences are triggered. Having someone alongside who will challenge without judging, and whose blind spots are different from our own, can be invaluable in getting out of the undertow and bringing new perspectives into view. Heifetz, using the metaphor of the ballroom, calls this ‘getting on the balcony’: you need to spend time on the dance floor to really feel the music, but you then need to get on the balcony

to see and make sense of the patterns that you cannot see when you are part of the dance.

In their conclusion, Ajit and Trevor speak about humility and curiosity as guiding principles. And they model these two principles throughout the book. As we try to make sense of situations that challenge us, can we stay curious (rather than beating ourselves up or blaming others), always asking the question, ‘What else ... and what else ...?’ And when our earlier sense-making is contradicted by new data, can we have the humility to let go of what may have felt to us—or impressed others—as great insights?

There are different ways to come along on these intriguing journeys. You can come as a passenger, reading the book as a kind of travelogue, finding resonances with experiences you have had yourself. Or you can choose to alight from time to time to consider your own moments of perplexity and derailment in more depth, using your emotional experiences to ‘consult to yourself’. And when you have gone as far as you can on your own, you might want to think who could accompany you in diving deeper to help you uncover what lies beneath.

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