THE GENUINE CONTACT™ WAY OF WORKING

Working Below the Surface
Applying the Deep Essence Tool

By Birgitt Williams
Co-Creator of the Genuine Contact Program and
President of Dalar International Consultancy

Organisations are multi-dimensional. Most of what occurs in the organisation is happening at the unseen levels and yet most organisational change efforts, including training programs, try to 'fix things' at the level of what is visible. This means that attention is focused on behaviours and actions rather than what is really happening under the surface that results in these behaviours and actions.

It almost never works.

At best, it works in the short term. Most leaders that we have interviewed have themselves concluded that training programs, organisational interventions by consultants, and other means of creating change at the level of behaviours and actions are not working. Timm Esque, in his *book Making an Impact: Building a Top Performing Organisation from the Bottom Up,* states that "one of the greatest challenges facing training and performance improvement professionals is the sustainability of solutions…as we and our clients direct our attention to the next important performance issue, problems we thought we had fixed tend to resurface".

Going Deeper

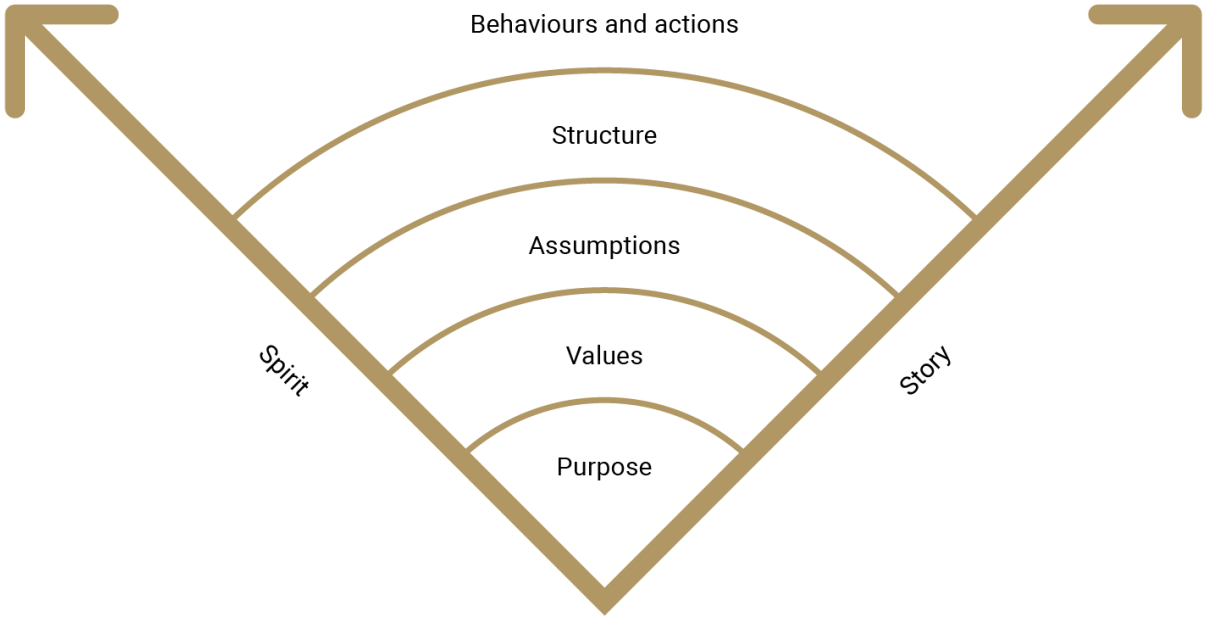
It is important to go deeper into the organisation to those unseen levels for successful change, way beneath the surface level of behaviours and actions. It is important not to be fooled into thinking that changes in behaviours and actions alone can bring about organisational health and balance. Like the iceberg theory that you may have learned years ago in management schools, where only the tip of the iceberg is visible, but most of it is under the surface of the water, the focus of successful change efforts needs to be on the unseen aspects of the organisation. The unseen aspects rarely are attended to, and yet they have the greatest impact on what you can accomplish.

This is like what is taught in family therapy. Family therapists are careful not to be engaged in the content of what is being told about as the problem. Instead, they know that the behaviours are supported to remain as they are because of something that is deeper and unseen in the family dynamics. When a family therapist is told that one family member is the troublemaker, often referred to as the 'odd one out' of the family, the therapist views this individual differently than how the family perceives him or her. The 'odd one out' often is the most honest one in the family, acting out the real dynamics of the family situation from a deeper level, mirroring what is really going on.

When I work with organisations that report to me that they have people in conflict, I keep in mind that these individuals may be the mirrors for what is really going on under the surface. In an unhealthy organisation, these individuals may indeed be among the healthiest even though they appear to be the troublemakers. They might indeed be the healthiest because they are still acting out their upsets and not pretending that everything is okay.

The Deep Essence Tool

A tool for understanding the depths of the organisation that require attention is presented here. The Deep Essence Tool can be easily drawn, easily explained, and its use is duplicable throughout the organisation.



The use of the radial arms of Spirit and Story and their importance in the organisation are more complex than the rest of the tool. The tool can be used effectively without addressing these two components or for use of this tool for a more in-depth look at the organisation, use they should also be integrated into the explanation and the work.

Using the Deep Essence

The Deep Essence Tool can be used to stimulate discussion about going deeper into the invisible parts of the organisation rather than being fooled into focusing on the behaviours and actions that are visible. Draw out the tool for your group and note that so many change efforts fail because they focus on the visible rather than what is under the surface. Explain that the tool is meant to be a slice out of a sphere representing the whole organisation. The sphere has layers, in a similar way to the layers of an onion. Under the surface layer of behaviours and actions is the structure that supports the existing (and maybe life-depleting) behaviours and actions. Below are all the assumptions made by the people involved that support the behaviours and actions and out of which the structure has been determined. Below the layer of assumptions are the values of the organisation and the values of the people involved, and below that is the understanding of the purpose of the organisation.

Taking another look at this slice of a sphere, going from the inside to the outside, is also valuable for pointing out that every layer supports the one outside of it, informing it and ultimately supporting operating decisions to be what they are. For example, “all operating decisions are related to the assumptions that are made.”

Once the members of your group have been oriented to this deep essence tool, give time so they can have a conversation about their responses to it. Changes to behaviours and actions are often achieved without any intentional work on behaviours and actions when the deeper essence, including purpose, values, and assumptions, are focused on and worked with. This may be difficult to accept at first. The best course of action is to test this out.

A method for working with the invisible layers of the organisation is to focus on assumptions. To do this, you will need to choose a topic and set aside about half a day with your group. Interesting topics to do this with that will have great benefit from being discussed include leadership, management, teamwork, the budget process, or conflict. I am going to use ‘management’ as the topic to describe to you how this works. This exercise is not only very beneficial; it is very easy to do and easily duplicable throughout your organisation. The exercise is found on the following page.

Taking the time to do the exercise to work with the assumptions is an upfront investment for any topic that needs to be sorted out in an organisation that will pay for itself repeatedly in achieving and sustaining a life-nourishing environment with all its benefits. The exercise raises to individual and collective consciousness all possible existing assumptions about the topic for all participants involved. Because all operating decisions are based on assumptions, consciousness about the assumptions with their accompanying implied values and purpose enables the best possible operating decisions to be developed. Further, there is more awareness of why the operating decision is made and what its impact is intended to be.

Working with assumptions to go deeper into the organisation toward health

As an example, the topic we are working through below is to develop a clearer picture of management in an organisation. For the activity described, the room should be set up in a circle of chairs for the start, with no tables. You will need a lot of wall space for hanging flip chart pages. Allow about three hours.

1. A facilitator orients participants to the task and gives the initial instructions.

2. Participants are asked to meet in smaller circles of three or four and to list their assumptions about 'management' in this organisation on flip chart paper. They are advised that assumptions may or may not be true, they may be contradictory, that the same person may even hold contradictory assumptions, and that all of this is natural. They are asked not to edit what feels like an acceptable or non-acceptable assumption. If the assumption is within them about the topic of management, it is a valid assumption to write up. They are told that when forty-five minutes is up, they are to return to the big circle and post their flip chart pages for all to see.

3. When participants return and have posted their pages, they are then given time to read the posted assumptions and are asked to work together to cross off any duplications between the lists to create a comprehensive list.

4. Participants are given red, green, and yellow sticky dots. They are asked to place a green dot on assumptions that they agree with as useful for the future, red dots on assumptions that they agree are clearly not useful for the future, and yellow dots on assumptions that they agree that, with minor changes, would be useful for the future. Many assumptions will receive no sticky dots.

5. The facilitator points out that all operating decisions are based on assumptions, and it is interesting what all the assumptions have been amongst the group to date about management. The facilitator then assists the group in developing their list of assumptions that they have identified as useful in the future, assisting the group to make any minor modifications needed to the statements. Voting for agreement is an option to develop a list based on consensus or based on majority in agreement.

6. Participants are then given the opportunity to have a conversation in the larger circle about anything that they learned about management in their organisation from having discussed assumptions.

7. The facilitator then asks the group as a whole to identify, from amongst the assumptions, the values of the present about management and the values that are useful to have into the future.

8. Participants are then given the opportunity to work in small groups of four or five for about twenty minutes to determine a statement of purpose about management in this organisation. They are to come to an agreed upon statement in their group, write it on flip chart paper, and bring it back to the larger circle for sharing. When all the statements have been shared, the facilitator works with the group to choose the truest statement, or to develop one by combining statements and editing as needed.

9. A meeting could be set for a later date to sort out what needs to be changed in the structure to support management to manage, and what changes are needed in behaviours and actions.

Another effective means of surfacing the assumptions and working with them for the benefit of an organisation is to make frequent use of very open participative meeting methodologies such as Open Space Technology and Whole Person Process Facilitation when needing solutions about any topic of concern in the organisation. The key is to choose a meeting methodology that is participative and open enough to allow the opportunity for people to say what needs to be said.