Seeing the System—The Soft Shoe Shuffle

Timing: 20-30 minutes, or longer—depending on the depth of the question(s) being explored and the level of conflict around them. A flexible amount of time is helpful for this exercise as the conversations it generates can be valuable if explored fully.

# of Participants: Any number (but it works best with less than 40)

Equipment needed: An open, flat space where people can move around with ease

PURPOSE/DESCRIPTION:

In order to better develop a group’s collective intelligence, it can be useful to see and hear how the individuals feel about a particular question or issue that they are working on. We can assume that we know, but we can be more effective in taking action if we do so based on direct input from the group. This process gives the group the opportunity to see and hear how people feel about various issues and why they do so.

There are (at least) two ways to use this exercise. The first is to get a quick sense from the group about where there is convergence and divergence around a particular topic. The second is to “work” the issue.

PROCESS:

1. Ask group to stand up and spread out in the room.

2. Then explain: We will use the space in the room to make visible the perspectives and understandings of this system. Each time someone speaks, the group will move in relation to that person according to how much they agree with them. For example, if you agree, stand right next to the person, if you disagree, stand across from the person on the other side of the room. Emphasise that this only works if people keep moving.

3. Work an example. Have one of the people in the group offer an observation about the issue that is being discussed. Have those that feel the same way move close to the speaker; those that feel differently move away (distance depends on how differently they feel). Have the group pause and look at where everyone has ended up. Demonstrate to the group that they don’t have to be stuck in a perspective. If they change their mind and agree more with a new voice, they simply move.

4. Facilitators can help by amplifying what is being said, or just by helping to illustrate where the roles are in the room. Don’t force the silent voices into the room directly. I.e. don’t say “James, you haven’t said anything — what do you think?” but rather “Does anyone who has been quiet wish to share?” and make eye contact with James and others who have been silent.

5. Look at the people who are farthest away (if there are any.) Ask them if they care to share why they are standing where they are. Throughout this process, each person can shift his/her position when they hear more of the discussion. For example, when someone who is standing farther away is asked to explain why they are standing where they are, and others find the perspective compelling, they can readjust their location based on this new information. Then, someone else may offer a clarifying statement that deepens the understanding and people may move closer (or farther away) from that person. In this way, the shuffle starts to flow and the perspectives get clearer.

6. This method also points out that rarely is someone completely alone in his or her perspective. Everyone owns a piece of it to varying degrees. It’s finding those areas of convergence and divergence that will create a fuller picture of the situation we’re addressing.

7. Close when the energy starts to lag and when someone makes a statement that is good for closing (not when someone has just made an attack on someone else). Ask participants to journal about what they saw and what role they played in the conversation. You may want to switch into another exercise based on the convergences or divergences that became visible.

8. This exercise requires the ability to be flexible with time, as you want to be able to take advantage of the rich conversations that it evokes.
In some workshops, we have used quotes from the initial interviews to start the process. We’ve handed quotes randomly to participants who then read them and the group reacts. This depersonalizes the quotes since they can be presented anonymously, but still gives voice to them and allows people to deepen their understanding through the facilitated conversation. There is a lot of space for creativity in how to work with the Soft Shoe Shuffle once you discover the power of literally “talking on our feet”.

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