From Conflict to Collaboration:
Creating Cultural Change Amidst Polarization

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When the greater good is thought about, usually it's in relation to solving social issues or improving the conditions and opportunities for marginalized populations. Yet, there are other situations that also fall into the context of greater good. One of them, the ability to heal long term conflict between groups, is the focus of this article. When two oppositional groups must work together an environment composed of distrust, contention, and polarization is created. Changing the quality and dynamics of such a relationship requires building new skills, constructing venues for problem solving, and allowing for a different understanding of one another. This article describes an integrated process of learning, coaching, and facilitation that was implemented over four years in order to transform a highly contentious relationship between a company's union leadership and its operational management teams into a collaborative, productive partnership.

Introduction

When organizations unionize, it is generally due to a perception by the front-line employee base that a company's officers, executive, and management teams are not taking care of 'their' people. This is evidenced by a long-running breakdown of trust, inequity, communication, and cooperation. Unionization, as a basic rule, does not occur in organizations in which employees are happy and feeling that they are valued. Airlines, such as the one discussed in this article, are great examples of unionized companies. In airlines, there are unions for flight attendants, pilots, maintenance technicians, and others.

When unions exist, contracts are the Holy Grail. For airlines, they delineate almost everything not regulated by the United States Federal Aviation Administration (FAA): pay rates, vacation, benefits, eating, processes for handling disturbances and critical incidents, hotel suitability, communication notification, uniform allowances and professional dress, food and beverage service, inclusion in company events and decision making venues, etc. Successful contract negotiations have taken as little as one year or as long as six years. Some contract negotiations collapse. The longer contract negotiation takes, the more likely the relationship between union leadership and company management is contentious.

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Without third party intervention, the relationship continues to erode. Employees carry moods such as resentment, discontent, distrust, and disdain. The only existing form of respect is disrespect. Conversations cease. Partnership is an unheard of commodity.

This article describes the process use to transform an airline's organizational culture from a state or constant conflict into one of partnership that continues even today (January 2021). It provides a brief overview of the changes that occurred and the modalities used to create the change: coaching, facilitation, conversation, and learning.

Although multiple modalities were used, the overall context for the work was underpinned by a coach approach, specifically having the client issue and desired outcome central to everything we did and as the determinant of our next steps and approach. The coaches/facilitators did not have the answers. Yet, we knew that if we created the right environment and set an appropriate context, the solutions would emerge.

Establishing an Initial Baseline

The airline industry operates in a vulnerable dynamic. Changes in global economy, public fear levels, inconsistent fuel availability and costs, and consumer perceptions profoundly influence an airline's financial wellbeing. Fiscal viability is the primary factor for determining bargaining agreements. When the company projects their fiscal viability as poor or uncertain, corporate officers ask employees for concessions such as reduced pay or benefits. When the company projects their fiscal viability as positive, the union leadership do their best to negotiate raises and increased benefits or participation in decision making for their membership.

Renee Freedman & Company was asked to intervene after four years of antagonistic negotiations. A collective bargaining agreement had been signed. Benefits and compensation that had been previously reduced due to loss of business had not been restored although the airline had become profitable. Customer satisfaction ratings were the worst in the regional airline industry. Complaints were rampant among employees as well as customers. Contention, distrust, and misery dominated the mood. Union leaders were disheartened and angry about the terms of the new contract. Grievance hearings and arbitrations regarding unfair practices and contract infractions were at an all-time high.

The Union's Master Executive Council (MEC) President and the MEC Vice President (VP) who negotiated the contract were impeached. A new union MEC President and board had just been elected and installed. A new company Senior Vice President (SVP) for customer service and VP for Flight Service had recently been appointed. They asked us to help them change the state of the labor-management relationship.

Initial interviews conducted with senior leaders of both groups revealed that civility, objective listening, fairness, and respect were missing and desired. Many unsubstantiated assessments about the integrity of each group existed. Trust was a slippery commodity. Neither group knew how it should proceed. Opinions about the 'right' way to move forward differed for both groups. Most everyone indicated the need for a respectful, communicative, and productive relationship and believed that the responsibility for that resided with the 'other' team.

In discussions, we discovered one common factor: everyone was happy to tell us the 'truth' about the causes for the failed relationship. This encouraged us. Perspectives of the company and labor senior leaders were used as the basis to develop a questionnaire designed to gather information in order to identify a baseline in three areas: trust, hope, and stewardship.

We conducted 29 interviews in hopes of:
   a) creating a current baseline of trust, hope, and stewardship among the two groups; and
   b) ascertaining whether or not members off each group were willing to spend two workdays together in a room.

Of the 29 people interviewed, 15 were airline managers and 14 were union leaders. One union leader responded to emails and calls, but did not show up for the scheduled interview. Interview findings were:

- Suspicion, anger, and distrust were the primary moods between the two groups.
- Trust was non-existent across group lines.
- At least one member of each group was distrusted by almost everyone interviewed.
- There was one person in each group that was trusted by 90% of the people interviewed.
- Neither group felt treated as professionals by the other group.
- Confidentiality was leverageable.

- Everyone, without exception, felt inadequately appreciated for his or her work.
- Clear distinctions between concepts such as 'personal' vs. 'professional' were absent.
- There was a misconception regarding the role listening plays in conversation.
- Monologue was the preferred method of speaking.
- Dialogue was perceived as giving up your power and unsafe.
- Managers expressed frustration that company rules were not adhered consistently. Union leaders expressed frustration about rules being applied unfairly and inconsistently.

- Not one person felt cared for by the other group.
- Each group had their own concept regarding what constituted appropriate working conditions for the front line employees.
- The group consistently perceived as most powerful was the one to which the interviewee did not belong.
- Each group felt that the intention of the other group was to control them.
- Everyone was concerned with backlash.
- Union leaders did not believe that senior airline managers were authentically committed to improve front line relationships or working conditions. Senior airline managers did not believe the union would willingly participate in a process that could improve the relationship.

The intensity in which the polarity of the relationship was expressed surprised us. Descriptors such as 'toxic,' 'cruel,' 'bullying,' 'eat their own,' 'back-biting,' 'animalistic,' and 'unforgiving' were spoken with ease. There was name-calling and tears. Two people questioned the safety of providing honest and full answers. However, none of the interviews were stopped prematurely.

A primary disconnect was role identity and the associated power/authority. The union insisted on being treated as professional equals while conducting joint business while the majority of first line managers perceived them as front line employees subordinate to them. Some managers also felt that strict adherence to rules, even if not applicable, must be agreed upon by the union before they would listen to union concerns.

Overall, we found little or no trust. Everyone *wanted* to trust, especially in the area of maintaining confidentiality. Furthermore, there was overwhelming doubt that authentic partnership could be

sustained. Yet, 90% of the interviewees believed that the relationship could be repaired. Underneath the doubt existed hope for partnership and collaboration.

The initial leadership group concurred with the accuracy of the findings. We were given a charter to facilitate one 'workshop'. We were to set the groundwork for a relationship and working environment in which professionalism and kindness prevailed. This charter was based on two premises:

      a) if both parties were kind and civil to one another, the relationship would be healthy, productive, and positive; and

      b) this could be accomplished in one two-day session.

Sharing a Room

Sixty-five people participated in the two-day session. We expected the groups to sit on opposite sides of the aisle. Instead, clusters of 3-5 union leaders and clusters of 4-6 managers sat amongst one another.

Each group filtered what they said and engaged in while in the other group's presence. Each small gesture by one of the groups was noted and used towards determining "can we trust that this is a true effort versus a manipulative one?" Trust had become so decimated that every action, physical gesture, and statement was assessed as a means to determine one another's credibility.

Our goals for the session were that:
- Both groups remain for the two day session.
- Both groups participate in the learning activities.
- Both groups engage in non-confrontational conversations.
- Both groups acknowledge one another positively at the end of the session.

Our approach focused on creating a two-day experience that allowed each participant to begin seeing one another a as human beings instead of 'opponents.' The current 'opponent' perspective of the group negatively influenced all conversations, mindsets, and the capacity to build trust. We did not ask them to start liking one another or to declare peace. We allowed them to be authentic in their feelings about one another and the overall relationship.

As part of the framework for productive engagement, we set guidelines for listening, speaking, and thinking. These included:

- listening without interruption
- focusing on listening for what could be learned
- refraining from name-calling or enraged emotional outbreaks

As the participants read these aloud, members of each group shouted with glee at having practices for engaging with one another in a peaceful and respectful manner.

Three elements were designed into the session's learning: fun, interaction, and food. We devoted most of the time in training them in the distinctions of trust, engaging in a game to give them an experience of collaboration, and in supporting them to develop an inclusive set of values that represented the collective group. They learned to adopt an 'and, yes' approach to balance their current 'either/or' approach. We did not engage in conversations about past experiences and history. To build a new foundation that encouraged trust, collaboration, productive conversations, and new actions, we needed to stay away from the minefield of the past.

During the activities, the room came alive with friendly banter, meaningful dialogue, and even laughter. Thee distrust and animosity were not apparent during that period of time in which they learned that they shared common cares and that safe dialogue was indeed possible.

Sharing food played a significant role in the success of the two days. One area where shared values were evident was in their value of food. Each group, independently and without prior coordination, brought snacks to share and broke bread together during lunch and breakfast. Dining and snacking appeared to be a peace zone for small talk and humor – untouched by history and antagonism.

The session's secondary purpose was to determine the coachability of key union leaders and senior managers. Activity discussions and comments made to us during break time instilled optimism for the 'coachability' of the groups.

An acknowledgment exercise, the session's last activity, was by far the most challenging exercise of the two days. Both groups were asked to acknowledge three positive qualities or actions of the other group. It took the groups 40 minutes to craft safe, general, yet authentic, acknowledgments.

At the end of this first session, the company SVP ran up to us with a huge grin and thanked us profusely. The MEC officers did the same. Both groups agreed that objectives were exceeded and that they desired to do this again. They also asked for sessions at the seven local hub-bases to start the necessary dialogues between the local managers and union representatives.

Local Flavor and a Little Group Coaching

Prior to the second national session, we visited all seven bases in order to identify the existing conflicts and the obstacles to creating partnership . The relationship between union leadership and Flight Service Managers varied in degree of compatibility and productivity. At two bases, the Flight Service Managers and union leaders engaged in pleasant and productive relationships. At two bases, there were contentious relationships. Three bases had a civil, yet distrusting, relationship.

These sessions provided an opportunity for group coaching and some spontaneous individual coaching. For the most part, the coaching resulted in insights and a shift of opinion about the other group. However, in cases where an individual operated in the victim-perpetrator-rescuer model, there was great resistance. We noted at least nine individuals taking a stand in order to keep their victim status alive. We witnessed seven people digging their heels in to keep their rescuer status alive. We observed three persons working really hard to create perpetrator personas. Since we were there to transform the current working environment into a collaborative one where every person was responsible and accountable for their behaviors, folks that operated from the victim-rescuer-perpetrator model perceived us as perpetrators. The current environment worked well for their chosen role personas and there was no desire to change.

Of the seven bases, six local teams engaged in conversation to move them forward into partnership. They discussed issues of an inter-relational nature and began to learn about each other's patterns, thought processes, assessments, sense of humor, and quirks. Many assumptions were put to rest. They reflected on the questions asked and revealed themselves to one another. Each of the six teams made commitments for applying specific new actions and practices.

Each person reported gaining something valuable. Union leaders, who originally doubted the company's sincerity, began to rethink their belief and allow for the possibility of that the company was sincere.

The session with the seventh group did not go well. They stated that they wanted a better relationship. However, this did not mean a partnership. They were fully immersed in the victim-perpetrator-rescuer model. There were clear victims and perpetrators. Yet, each also took turns playing the rescuer role for the group to which they belonged.

Amongst the tension, victimization, and perpetration, we learned that each longed to be rescued by and in control of one another. They were fighting over the victim role. We found no one open to coaching. In this session, we experienced the historical cruel and destructive relationship described during the interviews. In each case, the person declaring victimhood was perceived as a perpetrator by the other group. No one expressed interest in learning. Each group wanted to hear that they were right and the other group was wrong.

A Chaotic Second Session

It is not uncommon that the first try of a recipe is delicious but the second try of the recipe doesn't quite come out as tasty. This was our experience with the second two-day session. The tension that spilled over from the failed and hostile seventh group session was apparent. The mood created in the first session was overpowered by the angry and resentful mood generated by the seventh base. Shifting this tense mood was critical.

Session two's theme was learning. We presented distinctions associated with being a learner and the act of learning. These distinctions included habits that shut down the learning process, the role trust plays in learning, some learning models, and making a commitment to learning. Activities were conducted in triads or small groups.

Three factors eventually shifted the mood from tension to openness:
- the continued use of the interaction guidelines
- teaching the qualities and pitfalls of the victim-rescuer-perpetrator model
- an exercise that allowed them to personally experience the distinction between hearing from listening,

In the listening exercise, many participants observed that they engaged in little, if any, intentional listening with members of the other group. When they became present and listened, perceptions about one another shifted and erroneous assumptions about one another began to be corrected.

We discussed competencies required to be both trusting and trustworthy. After a self-assessment, each person discovered at least one area where they were not engaging in trustworthy behavior and one area in which they were distrusting.

Additionally, the learning theme provided a context to examine what was missing for them in the domain of trust. This not only highlighted the lack of intentional listening. It also uncovered the absence of a basic human being to human being relationship versus the current objectified relationships formed by the role one played and perceived power to which they were entitled.

After this second session, it was recognized that a 'partnership' process was needed with additional sessions and coaching.

The Process

The process was a long-term effort directed and managed equally by management and union leadership while being funded by the airline. The process consisted primarily of facilitated sessions between the two groups on national, local, and leadership levels complemented by 1:1 executive leadership coaching.

Stage One – Developing a baseline & vision

In the first phase, as described previously, representative members of each team were interviewed and a baseline of the current relationship, the challenges ahead, and a vision for what was desired was constructed. The first set of national and local dialogue sessions were conducted to present findings, identify the biggest and most urgent breakdowns, and conduct initial training. The focus was on creating an understanding of the importance of building trust, identifying shared values, and introducing basic protocols for expressive (speaking) and receptive (listening) communication. There was no coaching in this stage. The changes noted after this stage were:

- Communications became responsive instead of reactive
- Less rigidity about the rules by managers
- Both groups began acknowledging one another instead of ignoring each other when passing in hallways and at the airports.

Stage Two – Creating a learning culture

Stage Two started once there was some trust built between the two groups. This stage was focused on the phenomenon of learning. The objective was for them to learn competencies

foundational to building trust, collaborating on business matters, and creating an authentic partnership. Individual ontological coaching was provided to the senior leaders of both organizations and focused on moving into a new way of interacting and exploring their personal/professional relationship to trust. Spot coaching on site during session breaks and meals was offered to any participant and involved issues of trust across groups and within their own. The changes visible after this stage were:

- The discovery that once they learned a new skill that there was a 'next' one to learn
- Most internal personal issues within each group were able to be resolved by employing intentional listening skills which allowed misunderstandings to be rectified.
- Employee and Union leadership participation was fluid due to people who did not want change leaving or resigning and folks excited about the potential learning and change wanting to join the partnership process.
- A shared vocabulary to speak about the process with one another was agreed upon by a Regional Director and Local Union President. This was then adopted by other hubs/bases.

Stage Three – Practicing action and partnership

Stage Three was implemented when the collective group demonstrated some autonomous competency in the skills learned in the previous stage. In Stage Three, participants began to build authentic trust and have intentional dialogues with one another. Challenges were identified, trust was tested, joint decision making and problem solving was initiated, and issues were discussed in accordance with the guidelines and skills learned previously. Individual and spot coaching continued and as it progressed more issues of trust surfaced. Additionally, some Regional Directors and their Union counterparts sought coaching together to resolve long-standing issues. Changes visible after this stage were:

- The articulation, tracking, and resolution of issues related to frontline employees that were left unaddressed when initially brought to management's attention.
- The recognition that some of the issues were systemic in nature and required company-wide policy change.
- There was an absence of side conversations during the sessions as participants practiced intentional listening.
- Managers began to raise issues important to them for resolution. Previously, 90% of the issues were initiated by Union Leaders.
- Four of the five managers at the seventh base went back to the frontline or left the company.

- Participants began to notice personal growth and how they listened to and trusted their families.
- Participants started to believe in the integrity of the partnership process and the commitment of each group to see it through.

Stage Four – Accountable action

Stage Three and Stage Four overlapped when issue resolution began to be focused, first and foremost, in the interest of the frontline employees. In this phase, the team learned and engaged in a system of accountability. The groups made actionable commitments to one another that were tracked and revisited. Coaching extended to the first line of managers and to local labor leaders on an as needed basis. There was also a group coaching session focusing on resolving a major breakdown (see the fourth bullet below). The primary coaching focus areas were expectations and conflicting commitments, personal and professional ethics, putting accountability into practice, and stepping up their leadership. Visible change noted during and after this stage included:

- Management and labor leadership taking joint responsibility for the commitment tracking chart and for following up with the commitments each signed up to take action on.
- The two groups developed a procedure for handling and communicating critical incidents.
- The airline SVP and VP were invited to speak at an international union safety conference.
- When the company closed a hub and downsized another during this stage, the Union Leadership and Company Management team collaborated to create a plan. However, the company did not implement it and distrust once again became the primary mood of the labor participants.
- When the MEC VP passed away, the senior leadership secured a plane to privately transport union leaders to the funeral and back.

Stage Five – Integrative communication

In Stage Five, the teams move from defensive and offensive communication techniques to genuine open communication techniques. The need for negotiation and intimidation lessened as the leadership and management groups began to communicate as a collaborative team with similar objectives and focus. During this stage, the president of a local union accepted a position as a first line manager for his based. Additionally, the parent company transferred the SVP into its leadership team as COO. A new SVP joined the process. Also, due to new contract negotiations,

both groups asked to remain in this stage until a new contract was agreed upon. Coaching in this stage focused on developing meaningful relationships, leadership, and strategic thinking. Visible change during and after this stage included:

- Local issues were resolved collaboratively without having to seek our support or the support of national or corporate level personnel.
- Members of both groups became activists for the process in their parent organizations (corporate and national association) giving presentations to both boards.
- The contract negotiations process changed to include meaningful conversations based in authentic care.
- The two groups collaborate together to design and host front line employee appreciation days.

Disruption

Just after the newly negotiated contract was signed, the parent airline merged with another large airline. Instead of being the sole regional airline, it was one of twelve. Since the new parent organization was based primarily of a different team of executives and a different culture, the process was no longer funded. However, the partnership did not end.

Stage Six – Sustainability & stewardship

In this last, current, and continuous phase, the group became self-sustaining. Today, in 2021, the partnership continues to be strong. The VP continues to be coached. A different MEC President and the VP practice transparent communication, collaborate, and problem solve together. Local bases, although less of them, continue partnership sessions. The commitment and accountability process thrives. Management and labor leadership mentor new participants and officers in the interaction guidelines. This has led to the highest customer satisfaction of all twelve regional airlines which then resulted in expanded flights and an additional hub.

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Conclusion

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As we ended the facilitation of the process, we conducted a survey with 25 participants. 24 of the 25 respondents stated that there was a positive relationship between the company and union and that they support each other's mission. All 25 respondents indicated that the ability to trust one another has improved.

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Renee Freedman, President of Renee Freedman & Company, is an executive leadership and social impact coach, facilitator, and experiential designer of processes that specializes in large scale transformation, strategic leadership development, and creating collaborative work cultures. She also creates networks of coaches that provide coaching services to social impactors, activists, world-changers, and industry disruptors.